

interzone

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interzone

science fiction & fantasy

FEBRUARY 2002

Number 176

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Dear Editors:

It was a great pleasure to find that Evelyn Lewes and I are as one on the subject of the Sci-Fi Channel's *Dune* ("Ol' Blue Eyes is Back", *Interzone* 175).

A miniseries has many advantages over a Hollywood flick and to my mind is probably the only way to get decent sf onto the screen. A Hollywood treatment has to have a star name, it has to have a blockbuster budget and it has to keep its audience physically in the cinema. Hence it can't be too long and there must be enough going on at the superficial level to keep the attention of the dumbest viewer all the way through. These limitations fundamentally cripple any potentially good screen sf adaptation.

A miniseries, on the other hand, can afford to take life more easily. It can be told over a number of episodes. It can tell the many different stories within the main, overarching tale. It can afford cheaper effects and cast and spend more time on the actual storytelling. The Sci-Fi Channel's *Dune* has all of these qualities.

It has to be asked: if all a screen production does is tell the story, then why make a screen production? Why not just read the book? I would say for two reasons: (1) the screen production might reach those people who have never read the book, but should have, and (2) a screen production can bring certain parts of a book alive. For instance, the recent *Harry Potter* flick was entertaining, entirely superficial eye candy, adding or subtracting exactly nothing compared with J. K. Rowling's original. Except that the Quidditch match was stupendous. I never felt giddy or dizzy reading about it in the book, but now that I've seen it I feel that I finally get it.

Dune comes into its own in the middle third, between Paul and Jessica's flight into the sandstorm and Jessica's drinking of the Water of Life. We see Paul convincingly grow over a period of time from gauche youth to ruthless guerrilla leader; and even more important, we get to meet the Fremen in their Petra-esque communities, with all the attention to detail and design that Evelyn Lewes correctly describes. We actually see them as a separate civilization, a desert-dwelling people with a culture and customs and values all their own. One scene that really made its mark on me was a throwaway 30-second snippet which Paul does not even witness and is quite unessential to the plot. A group of Fremen are watching a puppet show being performed in one of the stiches, depicting green plants springing up out of the desert. We get to learn and understand and most important care about this fierce, proud, water-obsessed people.



INTERACTION

Their ways and their customs come to matter to us, the viewer. They truly are the desert power that Leto Atreides spoke of. Beast Rabban rules in Arrakeen but there is no question as to who rules Arrakis.

Okay, there is a certain inevitable cheapness to it. The inexpensive availability of a lot of mid-list mid-European actors leads to some interesting accents. Some of the matte lines are a bit too thick, the Fremen's eyes have a

tendency to wink back to their natural colour when the actor turns profile to camera, and I counted the same shot being used for an explosion-with-people-flying-through-the-air four times (three of them in the third part, which was careless editing if nothing else). But it tells the story, and it tells it well.

It has led me to thinking of other sf works that could benefit from the miniseries treatment of decent effects plus time to tell the whole story. Top of my list of favourites would have to be Niven and Pournelle's *The Mote in God's Eye*. Dan Simmons's Hyperion novels? Iain Banks's Culture novels? David Brin's Uplift novels? The latter could be put together sequentially as one long series. Orson Scott Card's parallel Ender and Shadow stories could be combined. You could even, I suppose, do *Mists of Avalon* – we might as well keep the fantasy fans happy...

While I'm here, I can't resist responding to D.G. Bishop's letter which was also in *IZ* 175. If he was watching the show I think he was then he is in fact correct – *Farscape* does have its own time-measuring units of microts, arms etc. It takes the entirely logical stance that all the characters speak in their own languages, and have the words of the other characters simultaneously translated inside their heads; hence, it would be meaningless to speak in terms of purely terrestrial time units. But yes, there are a lot of guns and a lot of shouting – that's what it's all about. And the uniforms, of course.

Ben Jeapes
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Wolfe's Dark Ages

Dear Editors:
Some thoughts on Gene Wolfe's article on J. R. R. Tolkien ("The Best Introduction to the Mountains," *IZ* 174). It's been a while since I read any Tolkien, but now that he goes.

I would argue that the Shire is based primarily on rural England at the time of the Great War, rather than some ill-defined golden age. Frodo's return home from the East echoes (deliberately?) Tolkien's own return from the Trenches: Tolkien hated the creeping industrialization of the rural landscape. Call me Mr Cynical, but I suspect that Wolfe's "idyllic" Germanic tribes would have been knocking lumps out of each other when they weren't fighting the Romans.

Furthermore, if the Shire had a national anthem, it might be "God bless the Squire and his relations, and keep us in our proper stations." Gene Wolfe implies that Sam Gamgee deserves honour not for what he has achieved,

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but purely because he is a friend of "Squire" Frodo. Does he seriously think that a return to pseudo-Feudalism would solve humanity's problems?

I'm not convinced that Tolkien aimed at anything other than creating a backdrop to a story or myth cycle; certainly not a serious template for some Utopia. The closest Tolkien got is probably Valinor, and even that didn't last, thanks to the likes of Melkor. Far from Middle-earth being a Utopia, at the end of *The Lord of the Rings* even the Elves are beginning to pack up and leave. Middle-earth would be a pleasant place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there.

Steve Connolly

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Popularity Poll 2001

Dear Editors:

In anticipation, I am sending my votes from last year's stories in early:

1. "Roach Motel" by Richard Calder – all great but this was the best one.
2. "The Waiting Room" by Zoran Živković – ditto.
3. "Under the Overlight" by Nigel Brown – excellent special John Christopher issue with lots of internal artwork.
4. "Isabel of the Fall" by Ian R. MacLeod – this was a great story and should have had a cover to do it justice.
5. "Babylon Sisters" by Paul Di Filippo – no. 168 was an excellent issue.
6. "Marcher" and "Watching the Sea" by Chris Beckett – I liked these two-parters.
7. "Restoring the Balance," parts one and two, by Tony Ballantyne – ditto.
8. "Ptaargin" by Stephen Dedman.
9. "Nucleon" by David D. Levine – there was a nice feel to issue 174, like a good issue of *F&SF*, if you can accept that as a compliment!
10. "Flickering" by Ayerdhal – more translations, please

Non Fiction:

The interview with Richard Calder. What can I say? Thanks.

Gene Wolfe on Tolkien – outstanding.

Gary Westfahl was very good about September 11, but I am sorry to say I found Tim Robins less readable.

Steve Tollyfield

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Black Gate

Dear Editors:

I read Nigel Brown's review "Another Gateway" (*IZ* 174) with great interest since I must surely be one of the very few readers of *IZ* fortunate enough to have obtained issue two of the American publication *Black Gate* (*BG*). It's such a shame *BG* isn't readily available in the UK.

My copy was filmed from a chap called Brian Hughes whose artwork graced Jeff Verona's "Under the

Interzone

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Bridge" (*BG* 2). Hughes, a longstanding acquaintance and family friend, is a British illustrator, cartoonist and briefly-published author who possesses a tiny but dedicated fan base and whose talents are yet to be recognized by the world at large. *BG*, having discovered some of Hughes' artwork on the internet, offered him two commissions – *BG* 2 and the forthcoming *BG* 3 or 4 which I also intend to purloin once it has reached these shores.

Having corresponded via e-mail with John O'Neill, *BG*'s editor, I understand he is seeking a distributor within the UK. I hope he succeeds soon, especially since *BG* is a worthy publication full of bursting with articles and reviews, original fiction by renowned authors and featuring long-buried treasures such as Edmond Hamilton's "The Monster-God of Mamurth." Meanwhile I shall endeavour to secure future issues of *BG* from source since my larcenous tendencies only stretch to "liberating" the complimentary issues that feature Hughes' artwork.

Finally, having sung the praises of *BG*, I must surely thank *Interzone* for the cracking stories, interviews and reviews that have kept me turning the pages of every issue over the last several years (since issue 112). Although I do not like every story you publish (I'm not the most dedicated aficionado of the "Lord Soho" stories) you continue to slake my thirst for quality short fiction and thought-provoking and often informative reviews (including the diatribes of Evelyn Lewes!) and I eagerly look forward to reading each issue.

Lynne Lancaster

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Disch's "After Postville"

Dear Editors:

I found Thomas M. Disch's "After Postville" (*IZ* 173) intriguing – but then, I've actually seen the PBS television documentary *Postville: Cultures in Collision* (to give it its full title). I figure, however, that that puts me in a very small group of those who have both seen the documentary and subscribe to *Interzone*. My question is, what do people who haven't seen the documentary make of the story?

Evelyn C. Leeper

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Nasturtium Buds

Dear Editors:

In the October *Interzone*, Evelyn Lewes reviews the Neil Gaiman-scripted episode of *Babylon 5*, "Day of the Dead," in some detail. At one point she describes the meeting of Garibaldi and dead-woman-briefly-returning Dodger, at which Dodger notes that she has only two bits of wisdom to share with Garibaldi, the second of which is that "Any poem by Emily Dickinson can be sung to the tune of 'The Yellow Rose of Texas'." Lewes admits that she "missed the first."

For anyone left on tenterhooks, Dodger's first bit of wisdom was that "Capers – those things they put on pizza – are pickled nasturtium buds."

This is from the published version of Gaiman's script – I've not seen the episode myself, nor any episode of *Babylon 5*, nor any episode of most of the shows Lewes reviews (which might be why I find her columns enjoyable). It is thus almost certainly not only the first but the only time I will ever be able to supply the answer to a *Babylon 5* trivia question.

Dennis Lien

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"Thanks for My First Ever Issue"

Dear Editors:

I received *Interzone* 175, my first ever copy, by post last week and I'd just like to say thank you for sending it so quickly. The thanks are a little delayed because I've only just finished reading – the whole thing deserves to be savoured.

Congratulations – I can see why you've had such a long run. Long may it continue.

Sue Stewart

Rotherham, S. Yorkshire

Singleton

Greg Egan

2003

I was walking north along George Street towards Town Hall railway station, pondering the ways I might solve the tricky third question of my linear algebra assignment, when I encountered a small crowd blocking the footpath. I didn't give much thought to the reason they were standing there; I'd just passed a busy restaurant, and I often saw groups of people gathered outside. But once I'd started to make my way around them, moving into an alley rather than stepping out into the traffic, it became apparent that they were not just diners from a farewell lunch for a retiring colleague, putting off their return to the office for as long as possible. I could see for myself exactly what was holding their attention.

Twenty metres down the alley, a man was lying on his back on the ground, shielding his bloodied face with his hands, while two men stood over him, relentlessly swinging narrow sticks of some kind. At first I thought the sticks were pool cues, but then I noticed the metal hooks on the ends. I'd only ever seen these obscure weapons pointed in one other place: my primary school, where an appointed window monitor would use them at the start and end of each day. They were meant for opening and closing an old-fashioned kind of hinged pane when it was too high to reach with your hands.

I turned to the other spectators. "Has anyone called the police?" A woman nodded without looking at me, and said, "Someone used their mobile, a couple of minutes ago."

The assailants must have realized that the police were on their way, but it seemed they were too committed to their task to abandon it until that was absolutely necessary. They were facing away from the crowd, so perhaps

they weren't entirely reckless not to fear identification. The man on the ground was dressed like a kitchen hand. He was still moving, trying to protect himself, but he was making less noise than his attackers; the need, or the ability, to cry out in pain had been beaten right out of him.

As for calling for help, he could have saved his breath.

A chill passed through my body, a sick cold churning sensation that came a moment before the conscious realization: *I'm going to watch someone murdered, and I'm going to do nothing.* But this wasn't a drunken brawl, where a few bystanders could step in and separate the combatants; the two assailants had to be serious criminals, settling a score. Keeping your distance from something like that was just common sense. I'd go to court, I'd be a witness, but no one could expect anything more of me. Not when 30 other people had behaved in exactly the same way.

The men in the alley did not have guns. If they'd had guns, they would have used them by now. They weren't going to mow down anyone who got in their way. It was one thing not to make a martyr of yourself, but how many people could these two grunting slobs fend off with sticks?

I unstrapped my backpack and put it on the ground. Absurdly, that made me feel more vulnerable; I was always worried about losing my textbooks. *Think about this. You don't know what you're doing.* I hadn't been in so much as a fist fight since I was 13. I glanced at the strangers around me, wondering if anyone would join in if I implored them to rush forward together. But that wasn't going to happen. I was a willowy, unimposing 18-year-old, wearing a T-shirt adorned with Maxwell's Equations. I had no presence, no authority. No one would follow me into the fray.

Alone, I'd be as helpless as the guy on the ground. These

men would crack my skull open in an instant. There were half a dozen solid-looking office workers in their 20s in the crowd; if these weekend rugby players hadn't felt competent to intervene, what chance did I have?

I reached down for my backpack. If I wasn't going to help, there was no point being here at all. I'd find out what had happened on the evening news.

I started to retrace my steps, sick with self-loathing. This wasn't *kristallnacht*. There'd be no embarrassing questions from my grandchildren. No one would ever reproach me.

As if that were the measure of everything.

"Fuck it." I dropped my backpack and ran down the alley.

I was close enough to smell the three sweating bodies over the stench of rotting garbage before I was even noticed. The nearest of the attackers glanced over his shoulder, affronted, then amused. He didn't bother redeploying his weapon in mid-stroke; as I hooked an arm around his neck in the hope of overbalancing him, he thrust his elbow into my chest, winding me. I clung on desperately, maintaining the hold even though I couldn't tighten it. As he tried to prise himself loose, I managed to kick his feet out from under him. We both went down onto the asphalt; I ended up beneath him.

The man untangled himself and clambered to his feet. As I struggled to right myself, picturing a metal hook swinging into my face, someone whistled. I looked up to see the second man gesturing to his companion, and I followed his gaze. A dozen men and women were coming down the alley, advancing together at a brisk walk. It was not a particularly menacing sight – I'd seen angrier crowds with peace signs painted on their faces – but the sheer numbers were enough to guarantee some inconvenience. The first man hung back long enough to kick me in the ribs. Then the two of them fled.

I brought my knees up, then raised my head and got into a crouch. I was still winded, but for some reason it seemed vital not to remain flat on my back. One of the office workers grinned down at me. "You fuckwit. You could have got killed."

The kitchen hand shuddered, and snorted bloody mucus. His eyes were swollen shut, and when he laid his hands down beside him, I could see the bones of his knuckles through the torn skin. My own skin turned icy, at this vision of the fate I'd courted for myself. But if it was a shock to realize how I might have ended up, it was just as sobering to think that I'd almost walked away and let them finish him off, when the intervention had actually cost me nothing.

I rose to my feet. People milled around the kitchen hand, asking each other about first aid. I remembered the basics from a course I'd done in high school, but the man was still breathing, and he wasn't losing vast amounts of blood, so I couldn't think of anything helpful that an amateur could do in the circumstances. I squeezed my way out of the gathering and walked back to the street. My backpack was exactly where I'd left it; no one had stolen my books. I heard sirens approaching; the police and the ambulance would be there soon.

My ribs were tender, but I wasn't in agony. I'd cracked

a rib falling off a trail bike on the farm when I was twelve, and I was fairly sure that this was just bruising. For a while I walked bent over, but by the time I reached the station I found I could adopt a normal gait. I had some grazed skin on my arms, but I couldn't have appeared too battered, because no one on the train looked at me twice.

That night, I watched the news. The kitchen hand was described as being in a stable condition. I pictured him stepping out into the alley to empty a bucket of fish-heads into the garbage, to find the two of them waiting for him. I'd probably never learn what the attack had been about unless the case went to trial, and as yet the police hadn't even named any suspects. If the man had been in a fit state to talk in the alley, I might have asked him then, but any sense that I was entitled to an explanation was rapidly fading.

The reporter mentioned a student "leading the charge of angry citizens" who'd rescued the kitchen hand, and then she spoke to an eye witness, who described this young man as "a New Ager, wearing some kind of astrological symbols on his shirt." I snorted, then looked around nervously in case one of my housemates had made the improbable connection, but no one else was even in earshot.

Then the story was over.

I felt flat for a moment, cheated of the minor rush that 15 seconds' fame might have delivered; it was like reaching into a biscuit tin when you thought there was one more chocolate chip left, to find that there actually wasn't. I considered phoning my parents in Orange, just to talk to them from within the strange afterglow, but I'd established a routine and it was not the right day. If I called unexpectedly, they'd think something was wrong.

So, that was it. In a week's time, when the bruises had faded, I'd look back and doubt that the incident had ever happened.

I went upstairs to finish my assignment.

Francine said, "There's a nicer way to think about this. If you do a change of variables, from x and y to z and z -conjugate, the Cauchy-Riemann equations correspond to the condition that the partial derivative of the function with respect to z -conjugate is equal to zero."

We were sitting in the coffee shop, discussing the complex analysis lecture we'd had half an hour before. Half a dozen of us from the same course had got into the habit of meeting at this time every week, but today the others had failed to turn up. Maybe there was a movie being screened, or a speaker appearing on campus that I hadn't heard about.

I worked through the transformation she'd described. "You're right," I said. "That's really elegant!"

Francine nodded slightly in assent, while retaining her characteristic jaded look. She had an undisguisable passion for mathematics, but she was probably bored out of her skull in class, waiting for the lecturers to catch up and teach her something she didn't already know.

I was nowhere near her level. In fact, I'd started the year poorly, distracted by my new surroundings: nothing so glamorous as the temptations of the night life, just the different sights and sounds and scale of the place, along

with the bureaucratic demands of all the organizations that now impinged upon my life, from the university itself down to the shared house groceries subcommittee. In the last few weeks, though, I'd finally started hitting my stride. I'd got a part-time job, stacking shelves in a supermarket; the pay was lousy, but it was enough to take the edge off my financial anxieties, and the hours weren't so long that they left me with no time for anything but study.

I doodled harmonic contours on the notepaper in front of me. "So what do you do for fun?" I said. "Apart from complex analysis?"

Francine didn't reply immediately. This wasn't the first time we'd been alone together, but I'd never felt confident that I had the right words to make the most of the situation. At some point, though, I'd stopped fooling myself that there was ever going to be a perfect moment, with the perfect phrase falling from my lips: something subtle but intriguing slipped deftly into the conversation, without disrupting the flow. So now I'd made my interest plain, with no attempt at artfulness or eloquence. She could judge me as she knew me from the last three months, and if she felt no desire to know me better, I would not be crushed.

"I write a lot of Perl scripts," she said. "Nothing complicated; just odds and ends that I give away as freeware. It's very relaxing."

I nodded understandingly. I didn't think she was being deliberately discouraging; she just expected me to be slightly more direct.

"Do you like Deborah Conway?" I'd only heard a couple of her songs on the radio myself, but a few days before I'd seen a poster in the city announcing a tour.

"Yeah. She's great."

I started thickening the conjugation bars over the variables I'd scrawled. "She's playing at a club in Surrey Hills," I said. "On Friday. Would you like to go?"

Francine smiled, making no effort now to appear world-weary. "Sure. That would be nice."

I smiled back. I wasn't giddy, I wasn't moonstruck, but I felt as if I was standing on the shore of an ocean, contemplating its breadth. I felt the way I felt when I opened a sophisticated monograph in the library, and was reduced to savouring the scent of the print and the crisp symmetry of the notation, understanding only a fraction of what I read. Knowing there was something glorious ahead, but knowing too what a daunting task it would be to come to terms with it.

I said, "I'll get the tickets on my way home."

To celebrate the end of exams for the year, the household threw a party. It was a sultry November night, but the back yard wasn't much bigger than the largest room in the house, so we ended up opening all the doors and windows and distributing food and furniture throughout the ground floor and the exterior, front and back. Once the faint humid breeze off the river penetrated the depths of the house, it was equally sweltering and mosquito-ridden everywhere, indoors and out.

Francine and I stayed close for an hour or so, obeying

the distinctive dynamics of a couple, until by some unspoken mutual understanding it became clear that we could wander apart for a while, and that neither of us was so insecure that we'd resent it.

I ended up in a corner of the crowded back yard, talking to Will, a biochemistry student who'd lived in the house for the last four years. On some level, he probably couldn't help feeling that his opinions about the way things were run should carry more weight than anyone else's, which had annoyed me greatly when I'd first moved in. We'd since become friends, though, and I was glad to have a chance to talk to him before he left to take up a scholarship in Germany.

In the middle of a conversation about the work he'd be doing, I caught sight of Francine, and he followed my gaze.

Will said, "It took me a while to figure out what finally cured you of your homesickness."

"I was never homesick."

"Yeah, right." He took a swig of his drink. "She's changed you, though. You have to admit that."

"I do. Happily. Everything's clicked, since we got together." Relationships were meant to screw up your studies, but my marks were soaring. Francine didn't tutor me; she just drew me into a state of mind where everything was clearer.

"The amazing thing is that you got together at all." I scowled, and Will raised a hand placatingly. "I just meant, when you first moved in, you were pretty reserved. And down on yourself. When we interviewed you for the room, you practically begged us to give it to someone more deserving."

"Now you're taking the piss."

He shook his head. "Ask any of the others."

I fell silent. The truth was, if I took a step back and contemplated my situation, I was as astonished as he was. By the time I'd left my home town, it had become clear to me that good fortune had nothing much to do with luck. Some people were born with wealth, or talent, or charisma. They started with an edge, and the benefits snowballed. I'd always believed that I had, at best, just enough intelligence and persistence to stay afloat in my chosen field; I'd topped every class in high school, but in a town the size of Orange that meant nothing, and I'd had no illusions about my fate in Sydney.

I owed it to Francine that my visions of mediocrity had not been fulfilled; being with her had transformed my life. But where had I found the nerve to imagine that I had anything to offer her in return?

"Something happened," I admitted. "Before I asked her out."

"Yeah?"

I almost clammed up; I hadn't told anyone about the events in the alley, not even Francine. The incident had come to seem too personal, as if to recount it at all would be to lay my conscience bare. But Will was off to Munich in less than a week, and it was easier to confide in someone I didn't expect to see again.

When I finished, Will bore a satisfied grin, as if I'd explained everything. "Pure karma," he announced. "I should have guessed."

"Oh, very scientific."

"I'm serious. Forget the Buddhist mystobabble; I'm talking about the real thing. If you stick to your principles, of course things go better for you – assuming you don't get killed in the process. That's elementary psychology. People have a highly developed sense of reciprocity, of the appropriateness of the treatment they receive from each other. If things work out too well for them, they can't help asking, 'What did I do to deserve this?' If you don't have a good answer, you'll sabotage yourself. Not all the time, but often enough. So if you do something that improves your self-esteem –"

"Self-esteem is for the weak," I quipped. Will rolled his eyes. "I don't think like that," I protested.

"No? Why did you even bring it up, then?"

I shrugged. "Maybe it just made me less pessimistic. I could have had the crap beaten out of me, but I didn't. That makes asking someone to a concert seem a lot less dangerous." I was beginning to cringe at all this unwanted analysis, and I had nothing to counter Will's pop psychology except an equally folksy version of my own.

He could see I was embarrassed, so he let the matter drop. As I watched Francine moving through the crowd, though, I couldn't shake off an unsettling sense of the tenuousness of the circumstances that had brought us together. There was no denying that if I'd walked away from the alley, and the kitchen hand had died, I would have felt like shit for a long time afterwards. I would not have felt entitled to much out of my own life.

I hadn't walked away, though. And even if the decision had come down to the wire, why shouldn't I be proud that I'd made the right choice? That didn't mean everything that followed was tainted, like a reward from some sleazy, palm-greasing deity. I hadn't won Francine's affection in a medieval test of bravery; we'd chosen each other, and persisted with that choice, for a thousand complicated reasons.

We were together now; that was what mattered. I wasn't going to dwell on the path that had brought me to her, just to dredge up all the doubts and insecurities that had almost kept us apart.

2012

As we drove the last kilometre along the road south from Ar Rafidiyah, I could see the Wall of Foam glistening ahead of us in the morning sunlight. Insubstantial as a pile of soap bubbles, but still intact, after six weeks.

"I can't believe it's lasted this long," I told Sadiq.

"You didn't trust the models?"

"Fuck, no. Every week, I thought we'd come over the hill and there'd be nothing but a shrivelled-up cobweb."

Sadiq smiled. "So you had no faith in my calculations?"

"Don't take it personally. There were a lot of things we could have both got wrong."

Sadiq pulled off the road. His students, Hassan and Rashid, had climbed off the back of the truck and started towards the Wall before I'd even got my face mask on. Sadiq called them back, and made them put on plastic boots and paper suits over their clothes, while the two of

us did the same. We didn't usually bother with this much protection, but today was different.

Close up, the Wall almost vanished: all you noticed were isolated, rainbow-fringed reflections, drifting at a leisurely pace across the otherwise invisible film as water redistributed itself, following waves induced in the membrane by the interplay of air pressure, thermal gradients, and surface tension. These images might easily have been separate objects, scraps of translucent plastic blowing around above the desert, held aloft by a breeze too faint to detect at ground level.

The further away you looked, though, the more crowded the hints of light became, and the less plausible any alternative hypothesis that denied the Wall its integrity. It stretched for a kilometre along the edge of the desert, and rose an uneven 15 to 20 metres into the air. But it was merely the first, and smallest, of its kind, and the time had come to put it on the back of the truck and drive it all the way back to Basra.

Sadiq took a spray can of reagent from the cabin, and shook it as he walked down the embankment. I followed him, my heart in my mouth. The Wall had not dried out; it had not been torn apart or blown away, but there was still plenty of room for failure.

Sadiq reached up and sprayed what appeared from my vantage to be thin air, but I could see the fine mist of droplets strike the membrane. A breathy susurrant rose up, like the sound from a steam iron, and I felt a faint warm dampness before the first silken threads appeared, crisscrossing the region where the polymer from which the Wall was built had begun to shift conformations. In one state, the polymer was soluble, exposing hydrophilic groups of atoms that bound water into narrow sheets of feather-light gel. Now, triggered by the reagent and powered by sunlight, it was tucking these groups into slick, oily cages, and expelling every molecule of water, transforming the gel into a desiccated web.

I just hoped it wasn't expelling anything else.

As the lacy net began to fall in folds at his feet, Hassan said something in Arabic, disgusted and amused. My grasp of the language remained patchy; Sadiq translated for me, his voice muffled by his face mask: "He says probably most of the weight of the thing will be dead insects." He shooed the youths back towards the truck before following himself, as the wind blew a glistening curtain over our heads. It descended far too slowly to trap us, but I hastened up the slope.

We watched from the truck as the Wall came down, the wave of dehydration propagating along its length. If the gel had been an elusive sight close up, the residue was entirely invisible in the distance; there was less substance to it than a very long pantyhose – albeit, pantyhose clogged with gnats.

The smart polymer was the invention of Sonja Helvig, a Norwegian chemist; I'd tweaked her original design for this application. Sadiq and his students were civil engineers, responsible for scaling everything up to the point where it could have a practical benefit. On those terms, this experiment was still nothing but a minor field trial.

I turned to Sadiq. "You did some mine clearance once,

"Years ago." Before I could say anything more, he'd caught my drift. "You're thinking that might have been more satisfying? Bang, and it's gone, the proof is there in front of you?"

"One less mine, one less bomblet," I said. "However many thousands there were to deal with, at least you could tick each one off as a definite achievement."

"That's true. It was a good feeling." He shrugged. "But what should we do? Give up on this, because it's harder?"

He took the truck down the slope, then supervised the students as they attached the wisps of polymer to the specialized winch they'd built. Hassan and Rashid were in their 20s, but they could easily have passed for adolescents. After the war, the dictator and his former backers in the west had found it mutually expedient to have a generation of Iraqi children grow up malnourished and without medical care, if they grew up at all. More than a million people had died under the sanctions. My own sick joke of a nation had sent part of its navy to join the blockade, while the rest stayed home to fend off boatloads of refugees from this, and other, atrocities. General Moustache was long dead, but his comrades-in-genocide with more salubrious addresses were all still at large: doing lecture tours, running think tanks, lobbying for the Nobel peace prize.

As the strands of polymer wound around a core inside the winch's protective barrel, the alpha count rose steadily. It was a good sign: the fine particles of uranium oxide trapped by the Wall had remained bound to the polymer during dehydration, and the reeling in of the net. The radiation from the few grams of U-238 we'd collected was far too low to be a hazard in itself; the thing to avoid was ingesting the dust, and even then the unpleasant effects were as much chemical as radiological. Hopefully, the polymer had also bound its other targets: the organic carcinogens that had been strewn across Kuwait and southern Iraq by the apocalyptic oil well fires. There was no way to determine that until we did a full chemical analysis.

We were all in high spirits on the ride back. What we'd plucked from the wind in the last six weeks wouldn't spare a single person from leukaemia, but it now seemed possible that over the years, over the decades, the technology would make a real difference.

I missed the connection in Singapore for a direct flight home to Sydney, so I had to go via Perth. There was a four-hour wait in Perth; I paced the transit lounge, restless and impatient. I hadn't set eyes on Francine since she'd left Basra three months earlier; she didn't approve of clogging up the limited bandwidth into Iraq with decadent video. When I'd called her from Singapore she'd been busy, and now I couldn't decide whether or not to try again.

Just when I'd resolved to call her, an email came through on my notepad, saying that she'd received my message and would meet me at the airport.

In Sydney, I stood by the baggage carousel, searching the crowd. When I finally saw Francine approaching, she was looking straight at me, smiling. I left the carousel and walked towards her; she stopped and let me close the

gap, keeping her eyes fixed on mine. There was a mischievousness to her expression, as if she'd arranged some kind of prank, but I couldn't guess what it might be.

When I was almost in front of her, she turned slightly, and spread her arms. "Ta-da!"

I froze, speechless. *Why hadn't she told me?*

I walked up to her and embraced her, but she'd read my expression. "Don't be angry, Ben. I was afraid you'd come home early if you knew."

"You're right, I would have." My thoughts were piling up on top of each other; I had three months' worth of reactions to get through in 15 seconds. *We hadn't planned this. We couldn't afford it. I wasn't ready.*

Suddenly I started weeping, too shocked to be self-conscious in the crowd. The knot of panic and confusion inside me dissolved. I held her more tightly, and felt the swelling in her body against my hip.

"Are you happy?" Francine asked.

I laughed and nodded, choking out the words: "This is wonderful!"

I meant it. I was still afraid, but it was an exuberant fear. Another ocean had opened up before us. We would find our bearings. We would cross it together.

It took me several days to come down to Earth. We didn't have a real chance to talk until the weekend; Francine had a teaching position at UNSW, and though she could have set her own research aside for a couple of days, marking could wait for no one. There were a thousand things to plan; the six-month UNESCO fellowship that had paid for me to take part in the project in Basra had expired, and I'd need to start earning money again soon, but the fact that I'd made no commitments yet gave me some welcome flexibility.

On Monday, alone in the flat again, I started catching up on all the journals I'd neglected. In Iraq I'd been obsessively single-minded, instructing my knowledge miner to keep me informed of work relevant to the Wall, to the exclusion of everything else.

Skimming through a summary of six months' worth of papers, a report in *Science* caught my eye: "An Experimental Model for Decoherence in the Many-Worlds Cosmology." A group at Delft University in the Netherlands had arranged for a simple quantum computer to carry out a sequence of arithmetic operations on a register which had been prepared to contain an equal superposition of binary representations of two different numbers. This in itself was nothing new; superpositions representing up to 128 numbers were now manipulated daily, albeit only under laboratory conditions, at close to absolute zero.

Unusually, though, at each stage of the calculation the qubits containing the numbers in question had been deliberately entangled with other, spare qubits in the computer. The effect of this was that the section performing the calculation had ceased to be in a pure quantum state: it behaved, not as if it contained two numbers simultaneously, but as if there were merely an equal chance of it containing either one. This had undermined the quantum nature of the calculation, just as surely as if the whole machine had been imperfectly shielded and

become entangled with objects in the environment.

There was one crucial difference, though: in this case, the experimenters had still had access to the spare qubits that had made the calculation behave classically. When they performed an appropriate measurement on the state of the computer as a whole, it was shown to have remained in a superposition all along. A single observation couldn't prove this, but the experiment had been repeated thousands of times, and within the margins of error, their prediction was confirmed: although the superposition had become undetectable when they ignored the spare qubits, it had never really gone away. Both classical calculations had always taken place simultaneously, even though they'd lost the ability to interact in a quantum-mechanical fashion.

I sat at my desk, pondering the result. On one level, it was just a scaling-up of the quantum eraser experiments of the '90s, but the image of a tiny computer program running through its paces, appearing "to itself" to be unique and alone, while in fact a second, equally oblivious version had been executing beside it all along, carried a lot more resonance than an interference experiment with photons. I'd become used to the idea of quantum computers performing several calculations at once, but that conjuring trick had always seemed abstract and ethereal, precisely because the parts continued to act as a complicated whole right to the end. What struck home here was the stark demonstration of the way each calculation could come to appear as a distinct classical history, as solid and mundane as the shuffling of beads on an abacus.

When Francine arrived home I was cooking dinner, but I grabbed my notepad and showed her the paper.

"Yeah, I've seen it," she said.

"What do you think?"

She raised her hands and recoiled in mock alarm.

"I'm serious."

"What do you want me to say? Does this prove the Many Worlds interpretation? No. Does it make it easier to understand, to have a toy model like this? Yes."

"But does it sway you at all?" I persisted. "Do you believe the results would still hold, if they could be scaled up indefinitely?" From a toy universe, a handful of qubits, to the real one.

She shrugged. "I don't really need to be swayed. I always thought the MWI was the most plausible interpretation anyway."

I left it at that, and went back to the kitchen while she pulled out a stack of assignments.

That night, as we lay in bed together, I couldn't get the Delft experiment out of my mind.

"Do you believe there are other versions of us?" I asked Francine.

"I suppose there must be." She conceded the point as if it was something abstract and metaphysical, and I was being pedantic even to raise it. People who professed belief in the MWI never seemed to want to take it seriously, let alone personally.

"And that doesn't bother you?"

"No," she said blithely. "Since I'm powerless to change

the situation, what's the use in being upset about it?"

"That's very pragmatic," I said. Francine reached over and thumped me on the shoulder. "That was a compliment!" I protested. "I envy you for having come to terms with it so easily."

"I haven't, really," she admitted. "I've just resolved not to let it worry me, which isn't quite the same thing."

I turned to face her, though in the near-darkness we could barely see each other. I said, "What gives you the most satisfaction in life?"

"I take it you're not in the mood to be fobbed off with a soppy romantic answer?" She sighed. "I don't know. Solving problems. Getting things right."

"What if for every problem you solve, there's someone just like you who fails, instead?"

"I cope with my failures," she said. "Let them cope with theirs."

"You know it doesn't work like that. Some of them simply *don't* cope. Whatever you find the strength to do, there'll be someone else who won't."

Francine had no reply.

I said, "A couple of weeks ago, I asked Sadiq about the time he was doing mine clearance. He said it was more satisfying than mopping up DU; one little explosion, right before your eyes, and you know you've done something worthwhile. We all get moments in our lives like that, with that pure, unambiguous sense of achievement: whatever else we might screw up, at least there's one thing that we've done right." I laughed uneasily. "I think I'd go mad, if I couldn't rely on that."

Francine said, "You can. Nothing you've done will ever disappear from under your feet. No one's going to march up and take it away from you."

"I know." My skin crawled, at the image of some less favoured alter ego turning up on our doorstep, demanding his dues. "That seems so fucking selfish, though. I don't want everything that makes me happy to be at the expense of someone else. I don't want every choice to be like... fighting other versions of myself for the prize in some zero-sum game."

"No," Francine hesitated. "But if the reality is like that, what can you do about it?"

Her words hung in the darkness. What could I do about it? Nothing. So did I really want to dwell on it, corroding the foundations of my own happiness, when there was absolutely nothing to be gained, for anyone?

"You're right. This is crazy." I leant over and kissed her. "I'd better let you go to sleep."

"It's not crazy," she said. "But I don't have any answers."

The next morning, after Francine had left for work, I picked up my notepad and saw that she'd mailed me an e-book: an anthology of cheesy "alternate (sic) history" stories from the '90s, entitled *My God, It's Full of Tsars!* "What if Gandhi had been a ruthless soldier of fortune? What if Theodore Roosevelt had faced a Martian invasion? What if the Nazis had had Janet Jackson's choreographer?"

I skimmed through the introduction, alternately cack-

ling and groaning, then filed the book away and got down to work. I had a dozen minor administrative tasks to complete for UNESCO, before I could start searching in earnest for my next position.

By mid-afternoon, I was almost done, but the growing sense of achievement I felt at having buckled down and cleared away these tedious obligations brought with it the corollary: someone infinitesimally different from me – someone who had shared my entire history up until that morning – had procrastinated instead. The triviality of this observation only made it more unsettling; the Delft experiment was seeping into my daily life on the most mundane level.

I dug out the book Francine had sent and tried reading a few of the stories, but the authors' relentlessly camp take on the premise hardly amounted to a *reductio ad absurdum*, or even a comical existential balm. I didn't really care how hilarious it would have been if Marilyn Monroe had been involved in a bedroom farce with Richard Feynman and Richard Nixon. I just wanted to lose the suffocating conviction that everything I had become was a mirage; that my life had been nothing but a blinkered view of a kind of torture chamber, where every glorious reprieve I'd ever celebrated had in fact been an unwitting betrayal.

If fiction had no comfort to offer, what about fact? Even if the Many Worlds cosmology was correct, no one knew for certain what the consequences were. It was a fallacy that literally everything that was physically possible had to occur; but cosmologists I'd read believed that the universe as a whole possessed a single, definite quantum state, and while that state would appear from within as a multitude of distinct classical histories, there was no reason to assume that these histories amounted to some kind of exhaustive catalogue. The same thing held true on a smaller scale: every time two people sat down to a game of chess, there was no reason to believe that they played every possible game.

And if I'd stood in an alley, nine years before, struggling with my conscience? My subjective sense of indecision proved nothing, but even if I'd suffered no qualms and acted without hesitation, to find a human being in a quantum state of pure, unshakeable resolve would have been freakishly unlikely at best, and in fact was probably physically impossible.

"Fuck this." I didn't know when I'd set myself up for this bout of paranoia, but I wasn't going to indulge it for another second. I banged my head against the desk a few times, then picked up my notepad and went straight to an employment site.

The thoughts didn't vanish entirely; it was too much like trying not to think of a pink elephant. Each time they recurred, though, I found I could shout them down with threats of taking myself straight to a psychiatrist. The prospect of having to explain such a bizarre mental problem was enough to give me access to hitherto untapped reserves of self-discipline.

By the time I started cooking dinner, I was feeling merely foolish. If Francine mentioned the subject again, I'd make a joke of it. I didn't need a psychiatrist. I was

a little insecure about my good fortune, and still somewhat rattled by the news of impending fatherhood, but it would hardly have been healthier to take everything for granted.

My notepad chimed. Francine had blocked the video again, as if bandwidth, even here, was as precious as water.

"Hello."

"Ben? I've had some bleeding. I'm in a taxi. Can you meet me at St Vincent's?"

Her voice was steady, but my own mouth went dry. "Sure. I'll be there in 15 minutes." I couldn't add anything: *I love you, it will be all right, hold on*. She didn't need that, it would have jinxed everything.

Half an hour later, I was still caught in traffic, white-knuckled with rage and helplessness. I stared down at the dashboard, at the real-time map with every other gridlocked vehicle marked, and finally stopped deluding myself that at any moment I would turn into a magically deserted side-street and weave my way across the city in just a few more minutes.

In the ward, behind the curtains drawn around her bed, Francine lay curled and rigid, her back turned, refusing to look at me. All I could do was stand beside her. The gynaecologist was yet to explain everything properly, but the miscarriage had been accompanied by complications, and she'd had to perform surgery.

Before I'd applied for the UNESCO fellowship, we'd discussed the risks. For two prudent, well-informed, short-term visitors, the danger had seemed microscopic. Francine had never travelled out into the desert with me, and even for the locals in Basra the rates of birth defects and miscarriages had fallen a long way from their peaks. We were both taking contraceptives; condoms had seemed like overkill. *Had I brought it back to her, from the desert? A speck of dust, trapped beneath my foreskin? Had I poisoned her while we were making love?*

Francine turned towards me. The skin around her eyes was grey and swollen, and I could see how much effort it took for her to meet my gaze. She drew her hands out from under the bedclothes, and let me hold them; they were freezing.

After a while, she started sobbing, but she wouldn't release my hands. I stroked the back of her thumb with my own thumb, a tiny, gentle movement.

2020

"How do you feel now?" Olivia Maslin didn't quite make eye contact as she addressed me; the image of my brain activity painted on her retinas was clearly holding her attention.

"Fine," I said. "Exactly the same as I did before you started the infusion."

I was reclining on something like a dentist's couch, halfway between sitting and lying, wearing a tight-fitting cap studded with magnetic sensors and inducers. It was impossible to ignore the slight coolness of the liquid flowing into the vein in my forearm, but that sensation was no different than it had been on the previous occasion, a fortnight before.

"Could you count to ten for me, please."

I obliged.

"Now close your eyes and picture the same familiar face as the last time."

She'd told me I could choose anyone; I'd picked Francine. I brought back the image, then suddenly recalled that, the first time, after contemplating the detailed picture in my head for a few seconds – as if I was preparing to give a description to the police – I'd started thinking about Francine herself. On cue, the same transition occurred again: the frozen, forensic likeness became flesh and blood.

I was led through the whole sequence of activities once more: reading the same short story ("Two Old-Timers" by F. Scott Fitzgerald), listening to the same piece of music (from Rossini's *The Thieving Magpie*), recounting the same childhood memory (my first day at school). At some point, I lost any trace of anxiety about repeating my earlier mental states with sufficient fidelity; after all, the experiment had been designed to cope with the inevitable variation between the two sessions. I was just one volunteer out of dozens, and half the subjects would be receiving nothing but saline on both occasions. For all I knew, I was one of them: a control, merely setting the baseline against which any real effect would be judged.

If I was receiving the coherence disruptors, though, then as far as I could tell they'd had no effect on me. My inner life hadn't evaporated as the molecules bound to the microtubules in my neurons, guaranteeing that any kind of quantum coherence those structures might otherwise have maintained would be lost to the environment in a fraction of a picosecond.

Personally, I'd never subscribed to Penrose's theory that quantum effects might play a role in consciousness; calculations dating back to a seminal paper by Max Tegmark, 20 years before, had already made sustained coherence in any neural structure extremely unlikely. Nevertheless, it had taken considerable ingenuity on the part of Olivia and her team to rule out the idea definitively, in a series of clear-cut experiments. Over the past two years, they'd chased the ghost away from each of the various structures that different factions of Penrose's disciples had anointed as the essential quantum components of the brain. The earliest proposal – the microtubules, huge polymeric molecules that formed a kind of skeleton inside every cell – had turned out to be the hardest to target for disruption. But now it was entirely possible that the cytoskeletons of my very own neurons were dotted with molecules that coupled them strongly to a noisy microwave field in which my skull was, definitely, bathed. In which case, my microtubules had about as much chance of exploiting quantum effects as I had of playing a game of squash with a version of myself from a parallel universe.

When the experiment was over, Olivia thanked me, then became even more distant as she reviewed the data. Raj, one of her graduate students, slid out the needle and stuck a plaster over the tiny puncture wound, then helped me out of the cap.

"I know you don't know yet if I was a control or not,"

I said, "but have you noticed significant differences, with anyone?" I was almost the last subject in the microtubule trials; any effect should have shown up by now.

Olivia smiled enigmatically. "You'll just have to wait for publication." Raj leant down and whispered, "No, never."

I climbed off the couch. "The zombie walks!" Raj declaimed. I lunged hungrily for his brain; he ducked away, laughing, while Olivia watched us with an expression of pained indulgence. Die-hard members of the Penrose camp claimed that Olivia's experiments proved nothing, because even if people *behaved* identically while all quantum effects were ruled out, they could be doing this as mere automata, totally devoid of consciousness. When Olivia had offered to let her chief detractor experience coherence disruption for himself, he'd replied that this would be no more persuasive, because memories laid down while you were a zombie would be indistinguishable from ordinary memories, so that looking back on the experience, you'd notice nothing unusual.

This was sheer desperation; you might as well assert that everyone in the world but yourself was a zombie, and you were one, too, every second Tuesday. As the experiments were repeated by other groups around the world, those people who'd backed the Penrose theory as a scientific hypothesis, rather than adopting it as a kind of mystical dogma, would gradually accept that it had been refuted.

I left the neuroscience building and walked across the campus, back towards my office in the physics department. It was a mild, clear spring morning, with students out lying on the grass, dozing off with books balanced over their faces like tents. There were still some advantages to reading from old-fashioned sheaves of e-paper. I'd only had my own eyes chipped the year before, and though I'd adapted to the technology easily enough, I still found it disconcerting to wake on a Sunday morning to find Francine reading the *Herald* beside me with her eyes shut.

Olivia's results didn't surprise me, but it was satisfying to have the matter resolved once and for all: consciousness was a purely classical phenomenon. Among other things, this meant that there was no compelling reason to believe that software running on a classical computer could not be conscious. Of course, everything in the universe obeyed quantum mechanics at some level, but Paul Benioff, one of the pioneers of quantum computing, had shown back in the '80s that you could build a classical Turing machine from quantum mechanical parts, and over the last few years, in my spare time, I'd studied the branch of quantum computing theory that concerned itself with *avoiding* quantum effects.

Back in my office, I summoned up a schematic of the device I called the Qusp: the quantum singleton processor. The Qusp would employ all the techniques designed to shield the latest generation of quantum computers from entanglement with their environment, but it would use them to a very different end. A quantum computer was shielded so it could perform a multitude of parallel calculations, without each one spawning a separate history of its own, in which only one answer was

accessible. The Qusp would perform just a single calculation at a time, but on its way to the unique result it would be able to pass safely through superpositions that included any number of alternatives, without those alternatives being made real. Cut off from the outside world during each computational step, it would keep its temporary quantum ambivalence as private and inconsequential as a daydream, never being forced to act out every possibility it dared to entertain.

The Qusp would still need to interact with its environment whenever it gathered data about the world, and that interaction would inevitably split it into different versions. If you attached a camera to the Qusp and pointed it at an ordinary object – a rock, a plant, a bird – that object could hardly be expected to possess a single classical history, and so neither would the combined system of Qusp plus rock, Qusp plus plant, Qusp plus bird.

The Qusp itself, though, would never initiate the split. In a given set of circumstances, it would only ever produce a single response. An AI running on the Qusp could make its decisions as whimsically, or with as much weighty deliberation as it liked, but for each distinct scenario it confronted, in the end it would only make one choice, only follow one course of action.

I closed the file, and the image vanished from my retinas. For all the work I'd put into the design, I'd made no effort to build the thing. I'd been using it as little more than a talisman: whenever I found myself picturing my life as a tranquil dwelling built over a slaughter house, I'd summon up the Qusp as a symbol of hope. It was proof of a possibility, and a possibility was all it took. Nothing in the laws of physics could prevent a small portion of humanity's descendants from escaping their ancestors' dissipation.

Yet I'd shied away from any attempt to see that promise fulfilled, firsthand. In part, I'd been afraid of delving too deeply and uncovering a flaw in the Qusp's design, robbing myself of the one crutch that kept me standing when the horror swept over me. It had also been a matter of guilt: I'd been the one granted happiness, so many times, that it had seemed unconscionable to aspire to that state yet again. I'd knocked so many of my hapless cousins out of the ring, it was time I threw a fight and let the prize go to my opponent instead.

That last excuse was idiotic. The stronger my determination to build the Qusp, the more branches there would be in which it was real. Weakening my resolve was not an act of charity, surrendering the benefits to someone else; it merely impoverished every future version of me, and everyone they touched.

I did have a third excuse. It was time I dealt with that one, too.

I called Francine.

"Are you free for lunch?" I asked. She hesitated; there was always work she could be doing. "To discuss the Cauchy-Riemann equations?" I suggested.

She smiled. It was our code, when the request was a special one. "All right. One o'clock?"

I nodded. "I'll see you then."

Francine was 20 minutes late, but that was less of a wait than I was used to. She'd been appointed deputy head of the mathematics department 18 months before, and she still had some teaching duties as well as all the new administrative work. Over the last eight years, I'd had a dozen short-term contracts with various bodies – government departments, corporations, NGOs – before finally ending up as a very lowly member of the physics department at our *alma mater*. I did envy her the prestige and security of her job, but I'd been happy with most of the work I'd done, even if it had been too scattered between disciplines to contribute to anything like a traditional career path.

I'd bought Francine a plate of cheese-and-salad sandwiches, and she attacked them hungrily as soon as she sat down. I said, "I've got ten minutes at the most, haven't I?"

She covered her mouth with her hand and replied defensively, "It could have waited until tonight, couldn't it?"

"Sometimes I can't put things off. I have to act while I still have the courage."

At this ominous prelude she chewed more slowly. "You did the second stage of Olivia's experiment this morning, didn't you?"

"Yeah." I'd discussed the whole procedure with her before I volunteered.

"So I take it you didn't lose consciousness, when your neurons became marginally more classical than usual?" She sipped chocolate milk through a straw.

"No. Apparently no one ever loses anything. That's not official yet, but –"

Francine nodded, unsurprised. We shared the same position on the Penrose theory; there was no need to discuss it again now.

I said, "I want to know if you're going to have the operation."

She continued drinking for a few more seconds, then released the straw and wiped her upper lip with her thumb, unnecessarily. "You want me to make up my mind about that, here and now?"

"No." The damage to her uterus from the miscarriage could be repaired; we'd been discussing the possibility for almost five years. We'd both had comprehensive chelation therapy to remove any trace of U-238. We could have children in the usual way with a reasonable degree of safety, if that was what we wanted. "But if you've already decided, I want you to tell me now."

Francine looked wounded. "That's unfair."

"What is? Implying that you might not have told me, the instant you decided?"

"No. Implying that it's all in my hands."

I said, "I'm not washing my hands of the decision. You know how I feel. But you know I'd back you all the way, if you said you wanted to carry a child." I believed I would have. Maybe it was a form of doublethink, but I couldn't treat the birth of one more ordinary child as some kind of atrocity, and refuse to be a part of it.

"Fine. But what will you do if I don't?" She examined my face calmly. I think she already knew, but she wanted me to spell it out.

"We could always adopt," I observed casually.

"Yes, we could do that." She smiled slightly; she knew that made me lose my ability to bluff, even faster than when she stared me down.

I stopped pretending that there was any mystery left; she'd seen right through me from the start. I said, "I just don't want to do this, then discover that it makes you feel that you've been cheated out of what you really wanted."

"It wouldn't," she insisted. "It wouldn't rule out anything. We could still have a natural child as well."

"Not as easily." This would not be like merely having workaholic parents, or an ordinary brother or sister to compete with for attention.

"You only want to do this if I can promise you that it's the only child we'd ever have?" Francine shook her head. "I'm not going to promise that. I don't intend having the operation any time soon, but I'm not going to swear that I won't change my mind. Nor am I going to swear that if we do this it will make no difference to what happens later. It will be a factor. How could it not be? But it won't be enough to rule anything in or out."

I looked away, across the rows of tables, at all the students wrapped up in their own concerns. She was right; I was being unreasonable. I'd wanted this to be a choice with no possible downside, a way of making the best of our situation, but no one could guarantee that. It would be a gamble, like everything else.

I turned back to Francine.

"All right; I'll stop trying to pin you down. What I want to do right now is go ahead and build the Qusp. And when it's finished, if we're certain we can trust it... I want us to raise a child with it. I want us to raise an AI."

2029

I met Francine at the airport, and we drove across Sao Paulo through curtains of wild, lashing rain. I was amazed that her plane hadn't been diverted; a tropical storm had just hit the coast, halfway between us and Rio.

"So much for giving you a tour of the city," I lamented. Through the windscreen, our actual surroundings were all but invisible; the bright overlay we both perceived, surreally coloured and detailed, made the experience rather like perusing a 3D map while trapped in a car wash.

Francine was pensive, or tired from the flight. I found it hard to think of San Francisco as remote when the time difference was so small, and even when I'd made the journey north to visit her; it had been nothing compared to all the ocean-spanning marathons I'd sat through in the past.

We both had an early night. The next morning, Francine accompanied me to my cluttered workroom in the basement of the university's engineering department. I'd been chasing grants and collaborators around the world, like a child on a treasure hunt, slowly piecing together a device that few of my colleagues believed was worth creating for its own sake. Fortunately, I'd managed to find pretexts – or even genuine spin-offs – for almost every stage of the work. Quantum computing, *per se*, had become bogged down in recent years, stymied by both a shortage of practical algorithms and a limit to the complexity of superpositions that could be sustained. The Qusp had nudged

the technological envelope in some promising directions, without making any truly exorbitant demands; the states it juggled were relatively simple, and they only needed to be kept isolated for milliseconds at a time.

I introduced Carlos, Maria and Jun, but then they made themselves scarce as I showed Francine around. We still had a demonstration of the "balanced decoupling" principle set up on a bench, for the tour by one of our corporate donors the week before. What caused an imperfectly shielded quantum computer to decohere was the fact that each possible state of the device affected its environment slightly differently. The shielding itself could always be improved, but Carlos's group had perfected a way to buy a little more protection by sheer deviousness. In the demonstration rig, the flow of energy through the device remained absolutely constant whatever state it was in, because any drop in power consumption by the main set of quantum gates was compensated for by a rise in a set of balancing gates, and *vice versa*. This gave the environment one less clue by which to discern internal differences in the processor, and to tear any superposition apart into mutually disconnected branches.

Francine knew all the theory backwards, but she'd never seen this hardware in action. When I invited her to tiddle the controls, she took to the rig like a child with a game console.

"You really should have joined the team," I said.

"Maybe I did," she countered. "In another branch."

She'd moved from UNSW to Berkeley two years before, not long after I'd moved from Delft to Sao Paulo; it was the closest suitable position she could find. At the time, I'd resented the fact that she'd refused to compromise and work remotely; with only five hours' difference, teaching at Berkeley from Sao Paulo would not have been impossible. In the end, though, I'd accepted the fact that she'd wanted to keep on testing me, testing both of us. If we weren't strong enough to stay together through the trials of a prolonged physical separation – or if I was not sufficiently committed to the project to endure whatever sacrifices it entailed – she did not want us proceeding to the next stage.

I led her to the corner bench, where a nondescript grey box half a metre across sat, apparently inert. I gestured to it, and our retinal overlays transformed its appearance, "revealing" a maze with a transparent lid embedded in the top of the device. In one chamber of the maze, a slightly cartoonish mouse sat motionless. Not quite dead, not quite sleeping.

"This is the famous Zelda?" Francine asked.

"Yes." Zelda was a neural network, a stripped-down, stylized mouse brain. There were newer, fancier versions available, much closer to the real thing, but the ten-year-old, public domain Zelda had been good enough for our purposes.

Three other chambers held cheese. "Right now, she has no experience of the maze," I explained. "So let's start her up and watch her explore." I gestured, and Zelda began scampering around, trying out different passages, deftly reversing each time she hit a *cul-de-sac*. "Her brain is

running on a Qusp, but the maze is implemented on an ordinary classical computer, so in terms of coherence issues, it's really no different from a physical maze."

"Which means that each time she takes in information, she gets entangled with the outside world," Francine suggested.

"Absolutely. But she always holds off doing that until the Qusp has completed its current computational step, and every qubit contains a definite zero or a definite one. She's never in two minds when she lets the world in, so the entanglement process doesn't split her into separate branches."

Francine continued to watch, in silence. Zelda finally found one of the chambers containing a reward; when she'd eaten it, a hand scooped her up and returned her to her starting point, then replaced the cheese.

"Here are 10,000 previous trials, superimposed." I replayed the data. It looked as if a single mouse was running through the maze, moving just as we'd seen her move when I'd begun the latest experiment. Restored each time to exactly the same starting condition, and confronted with exactly the same environment, Zelda – like any computer program with no truly random influences – had simply repeated herself. All 10,000 trials had yielded identical results.

To a casual observer, unaware of the context, this would have been a singularly unimpressive performance. Faced with exactly one situation, Zelda the virtual mouse did exactly one thing. So what? If you'd been able to wind back a flesh-and-blood mouse's memory with the same degree of precision, wouldn't it have repeated itself too?

Francine said, "Can you cut off the shielding? And the balanced decoupling?"

"Yep." I obliged her, and initiated a new trial.

Zelda took a different path this time, exploring the maze by a different route. Though the initial condition of the neural net was identical, the switching processes taking place within the Qusp were now opened up to the environment constantly, and superpositions of several different eigenstates – states in which the Qusp's qubits possessed definite binary values, which in turn led to Zelda making definite choices – were becoming entangled with the outside world. According to the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics, this interaction was randomly "collapsing" the superpositions into single eigenstates; Zelda was still doing just one thing at a time, but her behaviour had ceased to be deterministic. According to the MWI, the interaction was transforming the environment – Francine and me included – into a superposition with components that were coupled to each eigenstate; Zelda was actually running the maze in many different ways simultaneously, and other versions of us were seeing her take all those other routes.

Which scenario was correct?

I said, "I'll reconfigure everything now, to wrap the whole setup in a Delft cage." A "Delft cage" was jargon for the situation I'd first read about 17 years before: instead of opening up the Qusp to the environment, I'd connect it to a second quantum computer, and let *that* play the role of the outside world.

We could no longer watch Zelda moving about in real time, but after the trial was completed, it was possible to test the combined system of both computers against the hypothesis that it was in a pure quantum state in which Zelda had run the maze along hundreds of different routes, all at once. I displayed a representation of the conjectured state, built up by superimposing all the paths she'd taken in 10,000 unshielded trials.

The test result flashed up: **CONSISTENT**.

"One measurement proves nothing," Francine pointed out.

"No." I repeated the trial. Again, the hypothesis was not refuted. If Zelda had actually run the maze along just one path, the probability of the computers' joint state passing this imperfect test was about one percent. For passing it twice, the odds were about one in 10,000.

I repeated it a third time, then a fourth.

Francine said, "That's enough." She actually looked queasy. The image of the hundreds of blurred mouse trails on the display was not a literal photograph of anything, but if the old Delft experiment had been enough to give me a visceral sense of the reality of the multiverse, perhaps this demonstration had finally done the same for her.

"Can I show you one more thing?" I asked.

"Keep the Delft cage, but restore the Qusp's shielding?" "Right."

I did it. The Qusp was now fully protected once more whenever it was not in an eigenstate, but this time, it was the second quantum computer, not the outside world, to which it was intermittently exposed. If Zelda split into multiple branches again, then she'd only take that fake environment with her, and we'd still have our hands on all the evidence.

Tested against the hypothesis that no split had occurred, the verdict was: **CONSISTENT. CONSISTENT. CONSISTENT.**

We went out to dinner with the whole of the team, but Francine pleaded a headache and left early. She insisted that I stay and finish the meal, and I didn't argue; she was not the kind of person who expected you to assume that she was being politely selfless, while secretly hoping to be contradicted.

After Francine had left, Maria turned to me. "So you two are really going ahead with the Frankenchild?" She'd been teasing me about this for as long as I'd known her, but apparently she hadn't been game to raise the subject in Francine's presence.

"We still have to talk about it." I felt uncomfortable myself, now, discussing the topic the moment Francine was absent. Confessing my ambition when I applied to join the team was one thing; it would have been dishonest to keep my collaborators in the dark about my ultimate intentions. Now that the enabling technology was more or less completed, though, the issue seemed far more personal.

Carlos said breezily, "Why not? There are so many others now. Sophie. Linus. Theo. Probably a hundred we don't even know about. It's not as if Ben's child won't have playmates." Adai – Autonomously Developing Arti-

ficial Intelligences – had been appearing in a blaze of controversy every few months for the last four years. A Swiss researcher, Isabelle Schib, had taken the old models of morphogenesis that had led to software like *Zelda*, refined the technique by several orders of magnitude, and applied it to human genetic data. Wedded to sophisticated prosthetic bodies, Isabelle's creations inhabited the physical world and learnt from their experience, just like any other child.

Jun shook his head reprovingly. "I wouldn't raise a child with no legal rights. What happens when you die? For all you know, it could end up as someone's property."

It'd been over this with Francine. "I can't believe that in ten or 20 years' time there won't be citizenship laws, somewhere in the world."

Jun snorted. "Twenty years! How long did it take the U.S. to emancipate their slaves?"

Carlos interjected, "Who's going to create an *adai* just to use it as a slave? If you want something biddable, write ordinary software. If you need consciousness, humans are cheaper."

Maria said, "It won't come down to economics. It's the nature of the things that will determine how they're treated."

"You mean the xenophobia they'll face?" I suggested.

Maria shrugged. "You make it sound like racism, but we aren't talking about human beings. Once you have software with goals of its own, free to do whatever it likes, where will it end? The first generation makes the next one better, faster, smarter; the second generation even more so. Before we know it, we're like ants to them."

Carlos groaned. "Not that hoary old fallacy! If you really believe that stating the analogy 'ants are to humans, as humans are to *x*' is proof that it's possible to solve for *x*, then I'll meet you where the south pole is like the equator."

I said, "The Qusp runs no faster than an organic brain; we need to keep the switching rate low, because that makes the shielding requirements less stringent. It might be possible to nudge those parameters, eventually, but there's no reason in the world why an *adai* would be better equipped to do that than you or I would. As for making their own offspring smarter... even if Schib's group has been perfectly successful, they will have merely translated human neural development from one substrate to another. They won't have 'improved' on the process at all – whatever that might mean. So if the *adai* have any advantage over us, it will be no more than the advantage shared by flesh-and-blood children: cultural transmission of one more generation's worth of experience."

Maria frowned, but she had no immediate comeback.

Jun said dryly, "Plus immortality."

"Well, yes, there is that," I conceded.

Francine was awake when I arrived home.

"Have you still got a headache?" I whispered.

"No."

I undressed and climbed into bed beside her.

She said, "You know what I miss the most? When we're fucking on-line?"

"This had better not be complicated; I'm out of practice."

"Kissing."

I kissed her, slowly and tenderly, and she melted beneath me. "Three more months," I promised, "and I'll move up to Berkeley."

"To be my kept man."

"I prefer the term 'unpaid but highly valued caregiver.'" Francine stiffened. I said, "We can talk about that later." I started kissing her again, but she turned her face away.

"I'm afraid," she said.

"So am I," I assured her. "That's a good sign. Everything worth doing is terrifying."

"But not everything terrifying is good."

I rolled over and lay beside her. She said, "On one level, it's easy. What greater gift could you give a child, than the power to make real decisions? What worse fate could you spare her from, than being forced to act against her better judgment, over and over? When you put it like that, it's simple."

"But every fibre in my body still rebels against it. How will she feel, knowing what she is? How will she make friends? How will she belong? How will she not despise us for making her a freak? And what if we're robbing her of something she'd value: living a billion lives, never being forced to choose between them? What if she sees the gift as a kind of impoverishment?"

"She can always drop the shielding on the Qusp," I said. "Once she understands the issues, she can choose for herself."

"That's true." Francine did not sound mollified at all; she would have thought of that long before I'd mentioned it, but she wasn't looking for concrete answers. Every ordinary human instinct screamed at us that we were embarking on something *dangerous, unnatural, hubristic* – but those instincts were more about safeguarding our own reputations than protecting our child-to-be. No parent, save the most wilfully negligent, would be pilloried if their flesh-and-blood child turned out to be ungrateful for life; if I'd railed against my own mother and father because I'd found fault in the existential conditions with which I'd been lumbered, it wasn't hard to guess which side would attract the most sympathy from the world at large. Anything that went wrong with *our* child would be grounds for lynching – however much love, sweat, and soul-searching had gone into her creation – because we'd had the temerity to be dissatisfied with the kind of fate that everyone else happily inflicted on their own.

I said, "You saw *Zelda* today, spread across the branches. You know, deep down now, that the same thing happens to all of us."

"Yes." Something tore inside me as Francine uttered that admission. I'd never really wanted her to feel it, the way I did.

I persisted. "Would you willingly sentence your own child to that condition? And your grandchildren? And your great-grandchildren?"

"No," Francine replied. A part of her hated me now; I could hear it in her voice. It was *my* curse, *my* obsession; before she met me, she'd managed to believe and not

believe, taking her acceptance of the multiverse lightly.

I said, "I can't do this without you."

"You can, actually. More easily than any of the alternatives. You wouldn't even need a stranger to donate an egg."

"I can't do it unless you're behind me. If you say the word, I'll stop here. We've built the Qusp. We've shown that it can work. Even if we don't do this last part ourselves, someone else will, in a decade or two."

"If we don't do this," Francine observed acerbically, "we'll simply do it in another branch."

I said, "That's true, but it's no use thinking that way. In the end, I can't function unless I pretend that my choices are real. I doubt that anyone can."

Francine was silent for a long time. I stared up into the darkness of the room, trying hard not to contemplate the near certainty that her decision would go both ways.

Finally, she spoke.

"Then let's make a child who doesn't need to pretend."

2031

Isabelle Schib welcomed us into her office. In person, she was slightly less intimidating than she was on-line; it wasn't anything different in her appearance or manner, just the ordinariness of her surroundings. I'd envisaged her ensconced in some vast, pristine, high-tech building, not a couple of pokey rooms on a back-street in Basel.

Once the pleasantries were out of the way, Isabelle got straight to the point. "You've been accepted," she announced. "I'll send you the contract later today."

My throat constricted with panic; I should have been elated, but I just felt unprepared. Isabelle's group licensed only three new adai a year. The short-list had come down to about a hundred couples, winnowed from tens of thousands of applicants. We'd travelled to Switzerland for the final selection process, carried out by an agency that ordinarily handled adoptions. Through all the interviews and questionnaires, all the personality tests and scenario challenges, I'd managed to half-convince myself that our dedication would win through in the end, but that had been nothing but a prop to keep my spirits up.

Francine said calmly, "Thank you."

I coughed. "You're happy with everything we've proposed?" If there was going to be a proviso thrown in that rendered this miracle worthless, better to hear it now, before the shock had worn off and I'd started taking things for granted.

Isabelle nodded. "I don't pretend to be an expert in the relevant fields, but I've had the Qusp's design assessed by several colleagues, and I see no reason why it wouldn't be an appropriate form of hardware for an adai. I'm entirely agnostic about the MWI, so I don't share your view that the Qusp is a necessity, but if you were worried that I might write you off as cranks because of it," she smiled slightly, "you should meet some of the other people I've had to deal with."

"I believe you have the adai's welfare at heart, and you're not suffering from any of the superstitions – technophobic or technophilic – that would distort the

relationship. And as you'll recall, I'll be entitled to visits and inspections throughout your period of guardianship. If you're found to be violating any of the terms of the contract, your licence will be revoked, and I'll take charge of the adai."

Francine said, "What do you think the prospects are for a happier end to our guardianship?"

"I'm lobbying the European parliament, constantly," Isabelle replied. "Of course, in a few years' time several adai will reach the stage where their personal testimony begins contributing to the debate, but none of us should wait until then. The ground has to be prepared."

We spoke for almost an hour, on this and other issues. Isabelle had become quite an expert at fending off the attentions of the media; she promised to send us a handbook on this, along with the contract.

"Did you want to meet Sophie?" Isabelle asked, almost as an afterthought.

Francine said, "That would be wonderful." Francine and I had seen a video of Sophie at age four, undergoing a battery of psychological tests, but we'd never had a chance to converse with her, let alone meet her face to face.

The three of us left the office together, and Isabelle drove us to her home on the outskirts of the town.

In the car, the reality began sinking in anew. I felt the same mixture of exhilaration and claustrophobia that I'd experienced 21 years before, when Francine had met me at the airport with news of her pregnancy. No digital conception had yet taken place, but if sex had ever felt half as loaded with risks and responsibilities as this, I would have remained celibate for life.

"No badgering, no interrogation," Isabelle warned us as she pulled into the driveway.

I said, "Of course not."

Isabelle called out, "Marco! Sophie!" as we followed her through the door. At the end of the hall, I heard childish giggling, and an adult male voice whispering in French. Then Isabelle's husband stepped out from behind the corner, a smiling, dark-haired young man, with Sophie riding on his shoulders. At first I couldn't look at her; I just smiled politely back at Marco, while noting glumly that he was at least 15 years younger than I was. *How could I even think of doing this, at 46?* Then I glanced up, and caught Sophie's eye. She gazed straight back at me for a moment, appearing curious and composed, but then a fit of shyness struck her, and she buried her face in Marco's hair.

Isabelle introduced us, in English; Sophie was being raised to speak four languages, though in Switzerland that was hardly phenomenal. Sophie said, "Hello" but kept her eyes lowered. Isabelle said, "Come into the living room. Would you like something to drink?"

The five of us sipped lemonade, and the adults made polite, superficial conversation. Sophie sat on Marco's knees, squirming restlessly, sneaking glances at us. She looked exactly like an ordinary, slightly gawky, six-year-old girl. She had Isabelle's straw-coloured hair, and Marco's brown eyes; whether by fiat or rigorous genetic simulation, she could have passed for their biological daughter. I'd read technical specifications describing her

body, and seen an earlier version in action on the video, but the fact that it looked so plausible was the least of its designers' achievements. Watching her drinking, wriggling and fidgeting, I had no doubt that she felt herself inhabiting this skin, as much as I did my own. She was not a puppeteer posing as a child, pulling electronic strings from some dark cavern in her skull.

"Do you like lemonade?" I asked her.

She stared at me for a moment, as if wondering whether she should be affronted by the presumptuousness of this question, then replied, "It tickles."

In the taxi to the hotel, Francine held my hand tightly.

"Are you OK?" I asked.

"Yes, of course."

In the elevator, she started crying. I wrapped my arms around her.

"She would have been 20 this year."

"I know."

"Do you think she's alive, somewhere?"

"I don't know. I don't know if that's a good way to think about it."

Francine wiped her eyes. "No. This will be her. That's the way to see it. This will be my girl. Just a few years late."

Before flying home, we visited a small pathology lab, and left samples of our blood.

Our daughter's first five bodies reached us a month before her birth. I unpacked all five, and laid them out in a row on the living room floor. With their muscles slack and their eyes rolled up, they looked more like tragic mummies than sleeping infants. I dismissed that grisly image; better to think of them as suits of clothes. The only difference was that we hadn't bought pyjamas quite so far ahead.

From wrinkled pink newborn to chubby 18-month-old, the progression made an eerie sight – even if an organic child's development, short of serious disease or malnourishment, would have been scarcely less predictable. A colleague of Francine's had lectured me a few weeks before about the terrible "mechanical determinism" we'd be imposing on our child, and though his arguments had been philosophically naïve, this sequence of immutable snapshots from the future still gave me goose bumps.

The truth was, reality as a whole was deterministic, whether you had a Qusp for a brain or not; the quantum state of the multiverse at any moment determined the entire future. Personal experience – confined to one branch at a time – certainly *appeared* probabilistic, because there was no way to predict which local future you'd experience when a branch split, but the reason it was impossible to know that in advance was because the real answer was "all of them."

For a singleton, the only difference was that branches never split on the basis of your personal decisions. The world at large would continue to look probabilistic, but every choice you made was entirely determined by *who you were* and *the situation you faced*.

What more could anyone hope for? It was not as if *who you were* could be boiled down to some crude genetic or

sociological profile; every shadow you'd seen on the ceiling at night, every cloud you'd watched drift across the sky, would have left some small imprint on the shape of your mind. Those events were fully determined too, when viewed across the multiverse – with different versions of you witnessing every possibility – but in practical terms, the bottom line was that no private investigator armed with your genome and a potted biography could plot your every move in advance.

Our daughter's choices – like everything else – had been written in stone at the birth of the universe, but that information could only be decoded by *becoming her* along the way. Her actions would flow from her temperament, her principles, her desires, and the fact that all of these qualities would themselves have prior causes did nothing to diminish their value. *Free will* was a slippery notion, but to me it simply meant that your choices were more or less consistent with your nature – which in turn was a provisional, constantly-evolving consensus between a thousand different influences. Our daughter would not be robbed of the chance to act capriciously, or even perversely, but at least it would not be impossible for her ever to act wholly in accordance with her ideals.

I packed the bodies away before Francine got home. I wasn't sure if the sight would unsettle her, but I didn't want her measuring them up for more clothes.

The delivery began in the early hours of the morning of Sunday, December 14, and was expected to last about four hours, depending on traffic. I sat in the nursery while Francine paced the hallway outside, both of us watching the data coming through over the fibre from Basel.

Isabelle had used our genetic information as the starting point for a simulation of the development *in utero* of a complete embryo, employing an "adaptive hierarchy" model, with the highest resolution reserved for the central nervous system. The Qusp would take over this task, not only for the newborn child's brain, but also for the thousands of biochemical processes occurring outside the skull that the artificial bodies were not designed to perform. Apart from their sophisticated sensory and motor functions, the bodies could take in food and excrete wastes – for psychological and social reasons, as well as for the chemical energy this provided – and they breathed air, both in order to oxidize this fuel, and for vocalization, but they had no blood, no endocrine system, no immune response.

The Qusp I'd built in Berkeley was smaller than the Sao Paulo version, but it was still six times as wide as an infant's skull. Until it was further miniaturized, our daughter's mind would sit in a box in a corner of the nursery, joined to the rest of her by a wireless data link. Bandwidth and time lag would not be an issue within the Bay Area, and if we needed to take her further afield before everything was combined, the Qusp wasn't too large or delicate to move.

As the progress bar I was overlaying on the side of the Qusp nudged 98 per cent, Francine came into the nursery, looking agitated.

"We have to put it off, Ben. Just for a day. I need more

time to prepare myself."

I shook my head. "You made me promise to say no, if you asked me to do that." She'd even refused to let me tell her how to halt the Qusp herself.

"Just a few hours," she pleaded.

Francine seemed genuinely distressed, but I hardened my heart by telling myself that she was acting: testing me, seeing if I'd keep my word. "No. No slowing down or speeding up, no pauses, no tinkering at all. This child has to hit us like a freight train, just like any other child would."

"You want me to go into labour now?" she said sarcastically. When I'd raised the possibility, half-jokingly, of putting her on a course of hormones that would have mimicked some of the effects of pregnancy in order to make bonding with the child easier – for myself as well, indirectly – she'd almost bit my head off. I hadn't been serious, because I knew it wasn't necessary. Adoption was the ultimate proof of that, but what we were doing was closer to claiming a child of our own from a surrogate.

"No. Just pick her up."

Francine peered down at the inert form in the cot.

"I can't do it!" she wailed. "When I hold her, she should feel as if she's the most precious thing in the world to me. How can I make her believe that, when I know I could bounce her off the walls without harming her?"

We had two minutes left. I felt my breathing grow ragged. I could send the Qusp a halt code, but what if that set the pattern? If one of us had had too little sleep, if Francine was late for work, if we talked ourselves into believing that our special child was so unique that we deserved a short holiday from her needs, what would stop us from doing the same thing again?

I opened my mouth to threaten her: *Either you pick her up, now, or I do it.* I stopped myself, and said, "You know how much it would harm her psychologically, if you dropped her. The very fact that you're afraid that you won't convey as much protectiveness as you need to will be just as strong a signal to her as anything else. *You care about her.* She'll sense that."

Francine stared back at me dubiously.

I said, "She'll know. I'm sure she will."

Francine reached into the cot and lifted the slack body into her arms. Seeing her cradle the lifeless form, I felt an anxious twisting in my gut; I'd experienced nothing like this when I'd laid the five plastic shells out for inspection.

I banished the progress bar and let myself free-fall through the final seconds: watching my daughter, willing her to move.

Her thumb twitched, then her legs scissored weakly. I couldn't see her face, so I watched Francine's expression. For an instant, I thought I could detect a horrified tightening at the corners of her mouth, as if she was about to recoil from this golem. Then the child began to bawl and kick, and Francine started weeping with undisguised joy.

As she raised the child to her face and planted a kiss on its wrinkled forehead, I suffered my own moment of disquiet. How easily that tender response had been summoned, when the body could as well have been brought to life by the kind of software used to animate the characters in games and films.

It hadn't, though. There'd been nothing false or easy about the road that had brought us to this moment – let alone the one that Isabelle had followed – and we hadn't even tried to fashion life from clay, from nothing. We'd merely diverted one small trickle from a river already four billion years old.

Francine held our daughter against her shoulder, and rocked back and forth. "Have you got the bottle? Ben?" I walked to the kitchen in a daze; the microwave had anticipated the happy event, and the formula was ready.

I returned to the nursery and offered Francine the bottle. "Can I hold her, before you start feeding?"

"Of course." She leant forward to kiss me, then held out the child, and I took her the way I'd learnt to accept the babies of relatives and friends, cradling the back of her head with my hand. The distribution of weight, the heavy head, the play of the neck, felt the same as it did for any other infant. Her eyes were still screwed shut, as she screamed and swung her arms.

"What's your name, my beautiful girl?" We'd narrowed the list down to about a dozen possibilities, but Francine had refused to settle on one until she'd seen her daughter take her first breath. "Have you decided?"

"I want to call her Helen."

Gazing down at her, that sounded too old to me. Old-fashioned, at least. Great-Aunt Helen. Helena Bonham-Carter. I laughed inanely, and she opened her eyes.

Hairs rose on my arms. The dark eyes couldn't quite search my face, but she was not oblivious to me. Love and fear coursed through my veins. *How could I hope to give her what she needed?* Even if my judgment had been faultless, my power to act upon it was crude beyond measure.

We were all she had, though. We would make mistakes, we would lose our way, but I had to believe that something would hold fast. Some portion of the overwhelming love and resolve that I felt right now would have to remain with every version of me who could trace his ancestry to this moment.

I said, "I name you Helen."

2041

"Sophie! Sophie!" Helen ran ahead of us towards the arrivals gate, where Isabelle and Sophie were emerging. Sophie, almost 16 now, was much less demonstrative, but she smiled and waved.

Francine said, "Do you ever think of moving?"

"Maybe if the laws change first in Europe," I replied.

"I saw a job in Zürich I could apply for."

"I don't think we should bend over backwards to bring them together. They probably get on better with just occasional visits, and the net. It's not as if they don't have other friends."

Isabelle approached, and greeted us both with kisses on the cheek. I'd dreaded her arrival the first few times, but by now she seemed more like a slightly overbearing cousin than a child protection officer whose very presence implied misdeeds.

Sophie and Helen caught up with us. Helen tugged at Francine's sleeve. "Sophie's got a boyfriend! Daniel. She

showed me his picture." She swooned mockingly, one hand on her forehead.

I glanced at Isabelle, who said, "He goes to her school. He's really very sweet."

Sophie grimaced with embarrassment. "Three-year-old boys are sweet." She turned to me and said, "Daniel is charming, and sophisticated, and very mature."

I felt as if an anvil had been dropped on my chest. As we crossed the car park, Francine whispered, "Don't have a heart attack yet. You've got a while to get used to the idea."

The waters of the bay sparkled in the sunlight as we drove across the bridge to Oakland. Isabelle described the latest session of the European parliamentary committee into adai rights. A draft proposal granting personhood to any system containing and acting upon a significant amount of the information content of human DNA had been gaining support; it was a tricky concept to define rigorously, but most of the objections were Pythonesque rather than practical. "Is the Human Proteomic Database a person? Is the Harvard Reference Physiological Simulation a person?" The HRPS modelled the brain solely in terms of what it removed from, and released into, the bloodstream; there was nobody home inside the simulation, quietly going mad.

Late in the evening, when the girls were upstairs, Isabelle began gently grilling us. I tried not to grit my teeth too much. I certainly didn't blame her for taking her responsibilities seriously; if, in spite of the selection process, we had turned out to be monsters, criminal law would have offered no remedies. Our obligations under the licensing contract were Helen's sole guarantee of humane treatment.

"She's getting good marks this year," Isabelle noted. "She must be settling in."

"She is," Francine replied. Helen was not entitled to a government-funded education, and most private schools had either been openly hostile, or had come up with such excuses as insurance policies that would have classified her as hazardous machinery. (Isabelle had reached a compromise with the airlines: Sophie had to be powered down, appearing to sleep during flights, but was not required to be shackled or stowed in the cargo hold.) The first community school we'd tried had not worked out, but we'd eventually found one close to the Berkeley campus where every parent involved was happy with the idea of Helen's presence. This had saved her from the prospect of joining a net-based school; they weren't so bad, but they were intended for children isolated by geography or illness, circumstances that could not be overcome by other means.

Isabelle bid us good night with no complaints or advice; Francine and I sat by the fire for a while, just smiling at each other. It was nice to have a blemish-free report for once.

The next morning, my alarm went off an hour early. I lay motionless for a while, waiting for my head to clear, before asking my knowledge miner why it had woken me.

It seemed Isabelle's visit had been beaten up into a major story in some east coast news bulletins. A number of vocal members of Congress had been following the

debate in Europe, and they didn't like the way it was heading. Isabelle, they declared, had sneaked into the country as an agitator. In fact, she'd offered to testify to Congress any time they wanted to hear about her work, but they'd never taken her up on it.

It wasn't clear whether it was reporters or anti-adai activists who'd obtained her itinerary and done some digging, but all the details had now been splashed around the country, and protesters were already gathering outside Helen's school. We'd faced media packs, cranks, and activists before, but the images the knowledge miner showed me were disturbing; it was five a.m. and the crowd had already encircled the school. I had a flashback to some news footage I'd seen in my teens, of young schoolgirls in Northern Ireland running the gauntlet of a protest by the opposing political faction; I could no longer remember who had been Catholic and who had been Protestant.

I woke Francine and explained the situation.

"We could just keep her home," I suggested.

Francine looked torn, but she finally agreed. "It will probably all blow over when Isabelle flies out on Sunday. One day off school isn't exactly capitulating to the mob."

At breakfast, I broke the news to Helen.

"I'm not staying home," she said.

"Why not? Don't you want to hang out with Sophie?"

Helen was amused. "Hang out? Is that what the hippies used to say?" In her personal chronology of San Francisco, anything from before her birth belonged to the world portrayed in the tourist museums of Haight-Ashbury.

"Gossip. Listen to music. Interact socially in whatever manner you find agreeable."

She contemplated this last, open-ended definition. "Shop?"

"I don't see why not." There was no crowd outside the house, and though we were probably being watched, the protest was too large to be a moveable feast. Perhaps all the other parents would keep their children home, leaving the various placard wavers to fight among themselves.

Helen reconsidered. "No. We're doing that on Saturday. I want to go to school."

I glanced at Francine. Helen added, "It's not as if they can hurt me. I'm backed up."

Francine said, "It's not pleasant being shouted at. Insulted. Pushed around."

"I don't think it's going to be pleasant," Helen replied scornfully. "But I'm not going to let them tell me what to do."

To date, a handful of strangers had got close enough to yell abuse at her, and some of the children at her first school had been about as violent as (ordinary, drug-free, non-psychotic) nine-year-old bullies could be, but she'd never faced anything like this. I showed her the live news feed. She was not swayed. Francine and I retreated to the living room to confer.

I said, "I don't think it's a good idea." On top of everything else, I was beginning to suffer from a paranoid fear that Isabelle would blame us for the whole situation. Less fancifully, she could easily disapprove of us exposing Helen to the protesters. Even if that was not enough for her to terminate the licence immediately, eroding her

confidence in us could lead to that fate, eventually.

Francine thought for a while. "If we both go with her, both walk beside her, what are they going to do? If they lay a finger on us, it's assault. If they try to drag her away from us, it's theft."

"Yes, but whatever they do, she gets to hear all the poison they spew out."

"She watches the news, Ben. She's heard it all before."

"Oh, shit." Isabelle and Sophie had come down to breakfast; I could hear Helen calmly filling them in about her plans.

Francine said, "Forget about pleasing Isabelle. If Helen wants to do this, knowing what it entails, and we can keep her safe, then we should respect her decision."

I felt a sting of anger at the unspoken implication: having gone to such lengths to enable her to make meaningful choices, I'd be a hypocrite to stand in her way. *Knowing what it entails?* She was nine-and-a-half years old.

I admired her courage, though, and I did believe that we could protect her.

I said, "All right. You call the other parents. I'll inform the police."

The moment we left the car, we were spotted. Shouts rang out, and a tide of angry people flowed towards us.

I glanced down at Helen and tightened my grip on her. "Don't let go of our hands."

She smiled at me indulgently, as if I was warning her about something trivial, like broken glass on the beach. "I'll be all right, Dad." She flinched as the crowd closed in, and then there were bodies pushing against us from every side, people jabbering in our faces, spittle flying. Francine and I turned to face each other, making something of a protective cage and a wedge through the adult legs. Frightening as it was to be submerged, I was glad my daughter wasn't at eye level with these people.

"Satan moves her! Satan is inside her! Out, Jezebel spirit!" A young woman in a high-collared lilac dress pressed her body against me and started praying in tongues.

"Gödel's theorem proves that the non-computable, non-linear world behind the quantum collapse is a manifest expression of Buddha-nature," a neatly-dressed youth intoned earnestly, establishing with admirable economy that he had no idea what any of these terms meant. "Ergo, there can be no soul in the machine."

"Cyber nano quantum. Cyber nano quantum. Cyber nano quantum." That chant came from one of our would-be "supporters," a middle-aged man in lycra cycling shorts who was forcefully groping down between us, trying to lay his hand on Helen's head and leave a few flakes of dead skin behind; according to cult doctrine, this would enable her to resurrect him when she got around to establishing the Omega Point. I blocked his way as firmly as I could without actually assaulting him, and he wailed like a pilgrim denied admission to Lourdes.

"Think you're going to live forever, Tinkerbell?" A leering old man with a matted beard poked his head out in front of us, and spat straight into Helen's face.

"Arsehole!" Francine shouted. She pulled out a hand-

kerchief and started mopping the phlegm away. I crouched down and stretched my free arm around them. Helen was grimacing with disgust as Francine dabbed at her, but she wasn't crying.

I said, "Do you want to go back to the car?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

Helen screwed up her face in an expression of irritation. "Why do you always ask me that? *Am I sure? Am I sure?* You're the one who sounds like a computer."

"I'm sorry," I squeezed her hand.

We ploughed on through the crowd. The core of the protesters turned out to be both saner and more civilized than the lunatics who'd got to us first; as we neared the school gates, people struggled to make room to let us through uninjured, at the same time as they shouted slogans for the cameras. "Healthcare for all, not just the rich!" I couldn't argue with that sentiment, though adai were just one of a thousand ways the wealthy could spare their children from disease, and in fact they were among the cheapest: the total cost in prosthetic bodies up to adult size came to less than the median lifetime expenditure on healthcare in the U.S. Banning adai wouldn't end the disparity between rich and poor, but I could understand why some people considered it the ultimate act of selfishness to create a child who could live forever. They probably never wondered about the fertility rates and resource use of their own descendants over the next few thousand years.

We passed through the gates, into a world of space and silence; any protester who trespassed here could be arrested immediately, and apparently none of them were sufficiently dedicated to Gandhian principles to seek out that fate.

Inside the entrance hall, I squatted down and put my arms around Helen. "Are you OK?"

"Yes."

"I'm really proud of you."

"You're shaking." She was right; my whole body was trembling slightly. It was more than the crush and the confrontation, and the sense of relief that we'd come through unscathed. Relief was never absolute for me; I could never quite erase the images of other possibilities at the back of my mind.

One of the teachers, Carmela Peña, approached us, looking stoical; when they'd agreed to take Helen, all the staff and parents had known that a day like this would come.

Helen said, "I'll be OK now." She kissed me on the cheek, then did the same to Francine. "I'm all right," she insisted. "You can go."

Carmela said, "We've got 60 per cent of the kids coming. Not bad, considering."

Helen walked down the corridor, turning once to wave at us impatiently.

I said, "No, not bad."

A group of journalists cornered the five of us during the girls' shopping trip the next day, but media organizations had grown wary of lawsuits, and after Isabelle reminded them that she was presently enjoying "the ordinary lib-

erties of every private citizen" – a quote from a recent eight-figure judgment against *Celebrity Stalker* – they left us in peace.

The night after Isabelle and Sophie flew out, I went in to Helen's room to kiss her good night. As I turned to leave, she said, "What's a Qusp?"

"It's a kind of computer. Where did you hear about that?"

"On the net. It said I had a Qusp, but Sophie didn't."

Francine and I had made no firm decision as to what we'd tell her, and when I said, "That's right, but it's nothing to worry about. It just means you're a little bit different from her."

Helen scowled. "I don't want to be different from Sophie."

"Everyone's different from everyone else," I said glibly. "Having a Qusp is just like... a car having a different kind of engine. It can still go to all the same places." *Just not all of them at once.* "You can both still do whatever you like. You can be as much like Sophie as you want." That wasn't entirely dishonest; the crucial difference could always be erased, simply by disabling the Qusp's shielding.

"I want to be the same," Helen insisted. "Next time I grow, why can't you give me what Sophie's got, instead?"

"What you have is newer. It's better."

"No one else has got it. Not just Sophie; none of the others." Helen knew she'd nailed me: if it was newer and better, why didn't the younger adai have it too?

I said, "It's complicated. You'd better go to sleep now; we'll talk about it later." I fussed with the blankets, and she stared at me resentfully.

I went downstairs and recounted the conversation to Francine. "What do you think?" I asked her. "Is it time?"

"Maybe it is," she said.

"I wanted to wait until she was old enough to understand the MWI."

Francine considered this. "Understand it how well, though? She's not going to be juggling density matrices any time soon. And if we make it a big secret, she's just going to get half-baked versions from other sources."

I flopped onto the couch. "This is going to be hard." I'd rehearsed the moment a thousand times, but in my imagination Helen had always been older, and there'd been hundreds of other adai with Qusps. In reality, no one had followed the trail we'd blazed. The evidence for the MWI had grown steadily stronger, but for most people it was still easy to ignore. Ever more sophisticated versions of rats running mazes just looked like elaborate computer games. You couldn't travel from branch to branch yourself, you couldn't spy on your parallel alter egos – and such feats would probably never be possible. "How do you tell a nine-year-old girl that she's the only sentient being on the planet who can make a decision, and stick to it?"

Francine smiled. "Not in those words, for a start."

"No." I put my arm around her. We were about to enter a minefield – and we couldn't help diffusing out across the perilous ground – but at least we had each other's judgment to keep us in check, to rein us in a little.

I said, "We'll work it out. We'll find the right way."

2050

Around four in the morning, I gave in to the cravings and lit my first cigarette in a month.

As I drew the warm smoke into my lungs, my teeth started chattering, as if the contrast had forced me to notice how cold the rest of my body had become. The red glow of the tip was the brightest thing in sight, but if there was a camera trained on me it would be infrared, so I'd been blazing away like a bonfire, anyway. As the smoke came back up I spluttered like a cat choking on a fur ball; the first one was always like that. I'd taken up the habit at the surreal age of 60, and even after five years on and off, my respiratory tract couldn't quite believe its bad luck.

For five hours, I'd been crouched in the mud at the edge of Lake Pontchartrain, a couple of kilometres west of the soggy ruins of New Orleans. Watching the barge, waiting for someone to come home. I'd been tempted to swim out and take a look around, but my aide sketched a bright red moat of domestic radar on the surface of the water, and offered no guarantee that I'd remain undetected even if I stayed outside the perimeter.

I'd called Francine the night before. It had been a short, tense conversation.

"I'm in Louisiana. I think I've got a lead."

"Yeah?"

"I'll let you know how it turns out."

"You do that."

I hadn't seen her in the flesh for almost two years. After facing too many dead ends together, we'd split up to cover more ground: Francine had searched from New York to Seattle; I'd taken the south. As the months had slipped away, her determination to put every emotional reaction aside for the sake of the task had gradually eroded. One night, I was sure, grief had overtaken her, alone in some soulless motel room – and it made no difference that the same thing had happened to me, a months later or a week before. Because we had not experienced it together, it was not a shared pain, a burden made lighter. After 47 years, though we now had a single purpose as never before, we were starting to come adrift.

I'd learnt about Jake Holder in Baton Rouge, triangulating on rumours and fifth-hand reports of bar-room boasts. The boasts were usually empty; a prosthetic body equipped with software dumber than a microwave could make an infinitely pliable slave, but if the only way to salvage any trace of dignity when your buddies discovered that you owned the high-tech equivalent of a blow-up doll was to imply that there was somebody home inside, apparently a lot of men leapt at the chance.

Holder looked like something worse. I'd bought his lifetime purchasing records, and there'd been a steady stream of cyber-fetish porn over a period of two decades. Hardcore and pretentious; half the titles contained the word "manifesto". But the flow had stopped, about three months ago. The rumours were, he'd found something better.

I finished the cigarette, and slapped my arms to get the circulation going. *She would not be on the barge.* For all I knew, she'd heard the news from Brussels and was

already halfway to Europe. That would be a difficult journey to make on her own, but there was no reason to believe that she didn't have loyal, trustworthy friends to assist her. I had too many out-of-date memories burnt into my skull: all the blazing, pointless rows, all the petty crimes, all the self-mutilation. Whatever had happened, whatever she'd been through, she was no longer the angry 15-year-old who'd left for school one Friday and never come back.

By the time she'd hit 13, we were arguing about everything. Her body had no need for the hormonal flood of puberty, but the software had ground on relentlessly, simulating all the neuroendocrine effects. Sometimes it had seemed like an act of torture to put her through that – instead of hunting for some magic short-cut to maturity – but the cardinal rule had been never to tinker, never to intervene, just to aim for the most faithful simulation possible of ordinary human development.

Whatever we'd fought about, she'd always known how to shut me up. "I'm just a thing to you! An instrument! Daddy's little silver bullet!" I didn't care who she was, or what she wanted; I'd fashioned her solely to slay my own fears. (I'd lie awake afterwards, rehearsing lame counter-arguments. Other children were born for infinitely baser motives: to work the fields, to sit in boardrooms, to banish ennui, to save failing marriages.) In her eyes, the Qusp itself wasn't good or bad – and she turned down all my offers to disable the shielding; that would have let me off the hook too easily. But I'd made her a freak for my own selfish reasons; I'd set her apart even from the other adai, purely to grant myself a certain kind of comfort. "You wanted to give birth to a singleton? Why didn't you just shoot yourself in the head every time you made a bad decision?"

When she went missing, we were afraid she'd been snatched from the street. But in her room, we'd found an envelope with the locator beacon she'd dug out of her body, and a note that read: *Don't look for me. I'm never coming back.*

I heard the tyres of a heavy vehicle squelching along the muddy track to my left. I hunkered lower, making sure I was hidden in the undergrowth. As the truck came to a halt with a faint metallic shudder, the barge disgorged an unmanned motorboat. My aide had captured the data streams exchanged, one specific challenge and response, but it had no clue how to crack the general case and mimic the barge's owner.

Two men climbed out of the truck. One was Jake Holder; I couldn't make out his face in the starlight, but I'd sat within a few metres of him in diners and bars in Baton Rouge, and my aide knew his somatic signature: the electromagnetic radiation from his nervous system and implants; his body's capacitative and inductive responses to small shifts in the ambient fields; the faint gamma-ray spectrum of his unavoidable, idiosyncratic load of radioisotopes, natural and Chernobyl-esque.

I did not know who his companion was, but I soon got the general idea.

"One thousand now," Holder said. "One thousand when you get back." His silhouette gestured at the waiting

motorboat.

The other man was suspicious. "How do I know it will be what you say it is?"

"Don't call her 'it'," Holder complained. "She's not an object. She's my Lilith, my Lo-li-ta, my luscious clockwork succubus." For one hopeful moment, I pictured the customer snickering at this overheated sales pitch and coming to his senses; brothels in Baton Rouge openly advertised machine sex, with skilled human puppeteers, for a fraction of the price. Whatever he imagined the special thrill of a genuine adai to be, he had no way of knowing that Holder didn't have an accomplice controlling the body on the barge in exactly the same fashion. He might even be paying 2,000 dollars for a puppet job from Holder himself.

"OK. But if she's not genuine..."

My aide overheard money changing hands, and it had modelled the situation well enough to know how I'd wish, always, to respond. "Move now," it whispered in my ear. I complied without hesitation; 18 months before, I'd pavloved myself into swift obedience, with all the pain and nausea modern chemistry could induce. The aide couldn't puppet my limbs – I couldn't afford the elaborate surgery – but it overlaid movement cues on my vision, a system I'd adapted from off-the-shelf choreography software, and I strode out of the bushes, right up to the motorboat.

The customer was outraged. "What is this?"

I turned to Holder. "You want to fuck him first, Jake? I'll hold him down." There were things I didn't trust the aide to control; it set the boundaries, but it was better to let me improvise a little, and then treat my actions as one more part of the environment.

After a moment of stunned silence, Holder said icily, "I've never seen this prick before in my life." He'd been speechless for a little too long, though, to inspire any loyalty from a stranger; as he reached for his weapon, the customer backed away, then turned and fled.

Holder walked towards me slowly, gun outstretched. "What's your game? Are you after her? Is that it?" His implants were mapping my body – actively, since there was no need for stealth – but I'd tailed him for hours in Baton Rouge, and my aide knew him like an architectural plan. Over the starlit grey of his form, it overlaid a schematic, flaying him down to brain, nerves, and implants. A swarm of blue fireflies flickered into life in his motor cortex, prefiguring a peculiar shrug of the shoulders with no obvious connection to his trigger finger; before they'd reached the intensity that would signal his implants to radio the gun, my aide said "Duck."

The shot was silent, but as I straightened up again I could smell the propellant. I gave up thinking and followed the dance steps. As Holder strode forward and swung the gun towards me, I turned sideways, grabbed his right hand, then punched him hard, repeatedly, in the implant on the side of his neck. He was a fetishist, so he'd chosen bulky packages, intentionally visible through the skin. They were not hard-edged, and they were not inflexible – he wasn't that masochistic – but once you sufficiently compressed even the softest biocompatible foam, it might as well have been a lump of wood. While I ham-

mered the wood into the muscles of his neck, I twisted his forearm upwards. He dropped the gun; I put my foot on it and slid it back towards the bushes.

In ultrasound, I saw blood pooling around his implant. I paused while the pressure built up, then I hit him again and the swelling burst like a giant blister. He sagged to his knees, bellowing with pain. I took the knife from my back pocket and held it to his throat.

I made Holder take off his belt, and I used it to bind his hands behind his back. I led him to the motorboat, and when the two of us were on board, I suggested that he give it the necessary instructions. He was sullen but co-operative. I didn't feel anything; part of me still insisted that the transaction I'd caught him in was a hoax, and that there'd be nothing on the barge that couldn't be found in Baton Rouge.

The barge was old, wooden, smelling of preservatives and unvanquished rot. There were dirty plastic panes in the cabin windows, but all I could see in them was a reflected sheen. As we crossed the deck, I kept Holder intimately close, hoping that if there was an armed security system it wouldn't risk putting the bullet through both of us.

At the cabin door, he said resignedly, "Don't treat her badly." My blood went cold, and I pressed my forearm to my mouth to stifle an involuntary sob.

I kicked open the door, and saw nothing but shadows. I called out "Lights!" and two responded, in the ceiling and by the bed. Helen was naked, chained by the wrists and ankles. She looked up and saw me, then began to emit a horrified keening noise.

I pressed the blade against Holder's throat. "Open those things!"

"The shackles?"

"Yes!"

"I can't. They're not smart; they're just welded shut."

"Where are your tools?"

He hesitated. "I've got some wrenches in the truck. All the rest is back in town."

I looked around the cabin, then I lead him into a corner and told him to stand there, facing the wall. I knelt by the bed.

"Ssh. We'll get you out of here." Helen fell silent. I touched her cheek with the back of my hand; she didn't flinch, but she stared back at me, disbelieving. "We'll get you out." The timber bedposts were thicker than my arms, the links of the chains wide as my thumb. I wasn't going to snap any part of this with my bare hands.

Helen's expression changed: I was real, she was not hallucinating. She said loudly, "I thought you'd given up on me. Woke one of the backups. Started again."

I said, "I'd never give up on you."

"Are you sure?" She searched my face. "Is this the edge of what's possible? Is this the worst it can get?"

I didn't have an answer to that.

I said, "You remember how to go numb, for a shedding?"

She gave me a faint, triumphant smile. "Absolutely." She had to endure imprisonment and humiliation, but she'd always had the power to cut herself off from her body's senses.

"Do you want to do it now? Leave all this behind?"

"Yes."

"You'll be safe soon. I promise you."

"I believe you." Her eyes rolled up.

I cut open her chest and took out the Qusp.

Francine and I had both carried spare bodies, and clothes, in the trunks of our cars. Adai were banned from domestic flights, so Helen and I drove along the interstate, up towards Washington D.C., where Francine would meet us. We could claim asylum at the Swiss embassy; Isabelle had already set the machinery in motion.

Helen was quiet at first, almost shy with me as if with a stranger, but on the second day, as we crossed from Alabama into Georgia, she began to open up. She told me a little of how she'd hitchhiked from state to state, finding casual jobs that paid e-cash and needed no social security number, let alone biometric ID. "Fruit picking was the best."

She'd made friends along the way, and confided her nature to those she thought she could trust. She still wasn't sure whether or not she'd been betrayed. Holder had found her in a transient's camp under a bridge, and someone must have told him exactly where to look, but it was always possible that she'd been recognized by a casual acquaintance who'd seen her face in the media years before. Francine and I had never publicized her disappearance, never put up flyers or web pages, out of fear that it would only make the danger worse.

On the third day, as we crossed the Carolinas, we drove in near silence again. The landscape was stunning, the fields strewn with flowers, and Helen seemed calm. Maybe this was what she needed the most: just safety, and peace.

As dusk approached, though, I felt I had to speak.

"There's something I've never told you," I said. "Something that happened to me when I was young."

Helen smiled. "Don't tell me you ran away from the farm? Got tired of milking, and joined the circus?"

I shook my head. "I was never adventurous. It was just a little thing." I told her about the kitchen hand.

She pondered the story for a while. "And that's why you built the Qusp? That's why you made me? In the end, it all comes down to that man in the alley?" She sounded more bewildered than angry.

I bowed my head. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" she demanded. "Are you sorry that I was ever born?"

"No, but —"

"You didn't put me on that boat. Holder did that."

I said, "I brought you into a world with people like him. What I made you, made you a target."

"And if I'd been flesh and blood?" she said. "Do you think there aren't people like him, for flesh and blood? Or do you honestly believe that if you'd had an organic child, there would have been *no chance at all* that she'd have run away?"

I started weeping. "I don't know. I'm just sorry I hurt you."

Helen said, "I don't blame you for what you did. And I

understand it better now. You saw a spark of good in yourself, and you wanted to cup your hands around it, protect it, make it stronger. I understand that. I'm not that spark, but that doesn't matter. I know who I am, I know what my choices are, and I'm glad of that. I'm glad you gave me that." She reached over and squeezed my hand. "Do you think I'd feel *better*, here and now, just because some other version of me handled the same situations better?" She smiled. "Knowing that other people are having a good time isn't much of a consolation to anyone."

I composed myself. The car beeped to bring my attention to a booking it had made in a motel a few kilometres ahead.

Helen said, "I've had time to think about a lot of things. Whatever the laws say, whatever the bigots say, all adai are part of the human race. And what I have is something almost every person who's ever lived thought they possessed. Human psychology, human culture, human morality, all evolved with the illusion that we lived in a single history. But we don't – so in the long run, something has to give. Call me old-fashioned, but I'd rather we tinker with our physical nature than abandon our whole identities."

I was silent for a while. "So what are your plans, now?"

"I need an education."

"What do you want to study?"

"I'm not sure yet. A million different things. But in the long run, I know what I want to do."

"Yeah?" The car turned off the highway, heading for the motel.

"You made a start," she said, "but it's not enough. There are people in billions of other branches where the Qusp hasn't been invented yet – and the way things stand, there'll always be branches without it. What's the point in us having this thing, if we don't share it? All those people deserve to have the power to make their own choices."

"Travel between the branches isn't a simple problem," I explained gently. "That would be orders of magnitude harder than the Qusp."

Helen smiled, conceding this, but the corners of her mouth took on the stubborn set I recognized as the precursor to a thousand smaller victories.

She said, "Give me time, Dad. Give me time."

Greg Egan, who has become one of the world's best-known sf writers, first appeared in *Interzone* with "Mind Vampires" (issue 18, Winter 1986/1987). Of ours was the first magazine to publish him outside his native Australia. Of the many highly-praised stories that followed in these pages, the more recent have included "Reasons to Be Cheerful" (issue 118) and "Border Guards" (issue 148). His latest novel, due out from Gollancz on 21st February 2002, is *Schild's Ladder* (see the listing in this issue's "Books Received").

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The Violin-Maker

Zoran Živković

To the police inspector, it was an open-and-shut case. Mr Tomasi, master violin-maker, had committed suicide by jumping from the window of the garret of the three-storey building where he lived and ran his celebrated workshop. The tragic incident was reported by two eye-witnesses, a baker's roundsmen, delivering bread and rolls, who had been crossing the square early that morning. After hesitating a moment they had fearfully approached the place where the unfortunate man lay. He showed no signs of life, even though they could not see any external injuries.

Inspector Muratori quickly arrived at the scene of the incident and found out from the agitated young men, who had never seen death at first-hand before, that nothing had heralded the falling body. They had heard no sounds before the dull thud on the sidewalk, which had frightened the pigeons at the little fountain in the middle of the square like a sudden detonation. Most suicides who take their lives by jumping from a height make their intentions known by shouting once they have stepped into the abyss and it is too late to change anything. Only those who are firmly convinced that they are doing the right thing remain silent to the end.

One glance at the three-storey building told Inspector Muratori where Mr Tomasi had jumped from. The only open window was in the garret. Actually, he could have jumped off the roof, but there was no reason to choose such a steep, inaccessible place since the window was much more suitable and served his purpose equally well. Although one might not expect that of a suicide, the policeman knew that they did not, as a rule, make their last moments more difficult than necessary.

His examination of the inside of the house revealed

nothing to conflict with the suicide hypothesis – on the contrary. When he climbed up to the garret that looked out on the square, the inspector found the door locked from the inside. This was a precautionary measure typical of someone who did not want to be deterred from carrying out his intention. The door had to be forced, because there was no way to push the key out of the lock so as to open it with a skeleton key. The small room was sparsely furnished: a table and four chairs, a single bed, a washstand with a basin and pitcher in the corner, a large mirror. There was no rug on the floor, no curtains at the window, no pictures on the walls.

Mr Umbertini, the tall, thin man in his late 20s who was the late master violin-maker's assistant and lived alone with him in the house, explained that the garret was used exclusively for the final test of a new instrument. Mr Tomasi would go inside and play there alone for some time. Then he would come out, either with a smile on his face, which meant that he was satisfied with his work, or with a handful of firewood and broken strings; then it was best to stay away from him.

The inspector's efforts, with the help of the visibly distressed Mr Umbertini, to find a farewell letter that his master might have left somewhere produced no results. This was not unusual. Those who did not actually want to kill themselves, even though they actually did in the end, were the most frequent writers of such messages. Determined suicides did not find it necessary to interpret or justify their actions to the world, or to make their farewells.

By all appearances, Mr Tomasi belonged to that category. Obviously the man had been firmly resolved to take that step, and had set about it without hesitation.



This case was one for the textbooks, clear and unambiguous. There was nothing more to investigate. The causes that had led the esteemed master violin-maker to commit suicide had not been established, but were of no interest to earthly justice. Let divine justice handle them, for it alone could know what had been on the suicide's mind.

Inspector Muratori ordered Mr Umbertini to pack his things and leave the house so that it could be sealed pending probate. For a moment it seemed that the assistant wanted to make a comment or add something, about this or some other matter, but he held back. That was just as well. Everything had already been said, and the policeman could by no means help the poor man who was suddenly out on the street. But Inspector Muratori had seen far worse fates. This fellow would manage. A man who had learned the violin-maker's trade under maestro Tomasi need never be without an income. Such a recommendation would easily find him a job with another violin-maker, or he might even open his own shop.

The experienced policeman was rarely mistaken in his conclusions about people and their fates, but he was wrong this time. Mr Umbertini neither looked for new employment nor tried to set up making violins on his own. With the savings he been putting aside for years, he rented a small room in one of the narrow streets off the square where he used to live. The rent was not high because the room was partially below street level and quite humid. This did not bother him very much. In any event he only went there to sleep.

Mr Umbertini spent most of his time in a tavern not far from the maestro's house. He had not frequented the place before, primarily because he hadn't been the least inclined to drink, but also because it had a bad reputation as a hangout for the *demi-monde*. Now neither reason mattered. He started to drink, first moderately, just enough to feel slightly intoxicated; then more and more. He hardly felt when he crossed the line and became addicted. The tavern only served cheap, low-quality wines and spirits that made Mr Umbertini's head ache for a long time after waking in his dirty basement bed, but that did not deter him from going there every day.

At first the other tavern regulars were suspicious of the new patron, avoiding his company. With his genteel manners and appearance, he was not part of their world. But as time passed and he became more and more like them in his person and behaviour, they slowly started to warm to him. He no longer drank alone; they began to join him until finally all the places at his table were occupied almost all the time. They were a motley collection, and just a few months ago he certainly could not have imagined himself among them: frowning mercenaries from a regiment camped near the town, rotten-toothed and withered prostitutes, pickpockets on their way back from forays to the outdoor markets, tattered beggars, blemished and maimed.

Although Mr Umbertini had no desire to talk about the suicide, with these people or anyone else, the topic could not be avoided once their relations with the former assis-

tant to the celebrated violin-maker, by now a thoroughly unkempt drunk, became familiar enough to remove their inhibitions. Unlike the police, who found it unnecessary to delve into what had forced the maestro to suicide, this mystery had never stopped intriguing prying minds, even in such a hole as this. Mr Umbertini was subjected to a variety of approaches, from flattery through cajolery to threats, to get him to explain what had happened, but he withstood all such pressures without uttering a word. However, he could not avoid listening to the conjectures expounded by his fellow-drinkers at the table in the tavern, through the dense, stale cigarette smoke and sharp smell of sour wine.

One of the mercenaries, a man with a black patch over his left eye and a face full of scars, claimed that he had heard from a reliable source that a legacy of madness in the family lay behind it all. Mr Tomasi's paternal grandfather, a carpenter from a nearby village, had also taken his life, but in a far better way. When his mind had gone black he had shut himself in his workshop and started to stick every sharp tool he could find into his body. Not a single wound was fatal, but he died in prolonged agony, from blood loss, without uttering a single cry during that multiple, self-inflicted impalement. When his household forced their way into the workshop they beheld a horrible sight. The carpenter's body on the floor, arms outstretched like some horizontal crucifixion, resembled a hedgehog with 33 quills sticking out of it. His wife, who was five months pregnant, had a miscarriage and his only son, who was four at the time, was haunted his whole life by nightmares that made him wake up screaming.

Mr Umbertini could easily have refuted this awful story, but he didn't. In the early days of his apprenticeship he had met the maestro's paternal grandfather. He had been a watch-mender here in town and had died in his sleep, at an advanced age, from heart failure. He had outlived his wife by several years, leaving seven children. The third of them, the first son after two daughters, was Mr Tomasi's father, a cheerful and rather unruly man, certainly unburdened by dark stains from childhood, who died of suffocation on a fishbone, having been so incautious as to refill his mouth before he had finished laughing. Although not yet full-grown, the younger of his two sons, Alberto, who had inherited his mother's fine ear for music, took over his father's workshop where musical instruments were made and repaired. Not long afterwards he narrowed his activities exclusively to making violins, and over time earned a reputation for his exceptional workmanship.

One of the prostitutes, whose original beauty could still be discerned despite her dilapidated state (though she was barely over 30), had a completely different story. She had learned from someone trustworthy that the cause of Mr Tomasi's suicide was unrequited love. A travelling circus had camped near the town the previous summer and given performances on the square. Three musicians accompanied most of the acts, among them a young Gypsy woman who played the violin. At first the master

violin-maker had complained about the noisy disturbance every evening in front of his house, but when he saw and heard the girl he became more cordial.

He went to the window evening after evening and pretended to watch the events on the square, but never actually took his eyes off the young Gypsy. Finally, he went up to her at the end of a show, bringing the best instrument he had ever made. He invited her to his house and proposed that she play this violin for him alone during the coming night, promising to pay her generously in return. The girl whispered briefly to one of the other two musicians, and then accepted. When she left Mr Tomasi's house the next morning she was carrying the precious instrument wrapped in brown felt.

The next evening the master violin-maker waited impatiently on the terrace for the customary circus performance, but no one appeared. In the meantime the travelling show had decamped and continued on its way. Mr Tomasi hired a horse at daybreak and set out in frantic search for them. He went to many of the nearby towns without finding a trace of the entertainers. The earth seemed to have swallowed them up. Completely crushed, he had been forced to give up in the end. He returned home, hoping that time would heal his wounds and he would somehow forget the beautiful violinist, but he couldn't get over her. He fell into deeper and deeper depression, slowly losing the will and ability to make any more instruments. Finally, sunk into total despair, he decided to end his suffering.

The late master violin-maker's assistant knew from the outset that this story hadn't a grain of truth, but he didn't say so, among other things so as not to ruin the woman's pleasurable excitement as she recounted her tale. There was, in truth, a sad tale of love in the violin-maker's life, but it dated from his much younger days, while he was still learning the skills of his trade. Love blossomed between him and a close cousin on his mother's side. Although forbidden and clandestine, it was tempestuous, as often happens at that age. Who knows how things might have ended had illness not intervened. The girl came down with galloping tuberculosis and died only a few weeks later. He never became attached to a single woman after that, although he did not renounce them. He tried to be as inconspicuous as possible when he slaked his urges, usually going to other towns for that purpose.

One of the pickpockets, a man with long, clever fingers, but a face that was the very incarnation of innocence, swore on his honour that he had first-hand knowledge about the real reason why Mr Tomasi had killed himself. It was because of a huge gambling loss he had suffered. The violin-maker had been in the clutches of this obsession for some time, although no one knew anything about it, not even his assistant who lived under the same roof. A group of gamblers used to meet secretly at his house every Friday, going up to the garret from which he had finally jumped to his death. They would cover the window with

the blanket from the bed so no one from outside suspected anything, and then the game that would start by candlelight often lasted until dawn.

As an honourable man, the violin-maker had been convinced that his companions were his equals in integrity. He had had not the slightest inkling that he had fallen into a network of shrewd and unscrupulous cheats. At first they bet small amounts, and he mostly won. Then Lady Luck suddenly turned her back on him. He started losing, not only his money but his common sense. He agreed to increase the bets in the futile hope that he would win back what he had lost, but he only sank deeper and deeper into debt. When his cash and valuables disappeared, he started to write IOUs. First he lost his large estate in the country, then his house in town. He still managed to hold up somehow, but when the cards took away the last of his expensive instruments, he realized he had hit rock bottom. In the end he caught on, realizing he had been the victim of a hoax, but there was no turning back. Unable to live with the thought that his violins were in the hands of cunning thieves, he sentenced himself to the ultimate punishment.

That was pure invention, of course, but Mr Umbertini still made no comment. Gambling organized every Friday, however discreetly, would never have escaped his attention. Moreover, Mr Tomasi had never had a country estate to lose. Far more important than these details, however, was the fact that gambling was the last vice to which the maestro would have succumbed; without ever being touched by it personally, he had experienced the grievous consequences of this addiction.

The violin-maker's older brother, Roberto Tomasi, had been a regular attendee at large casinos since he was a young man. He had left his share of their father's inheritance in them long ago, but for some time afterwards continued to gratify this irresistible vice thanks to his brother's generous support. Alberto had shown a strange compassion for Roberto's weakness, agreeing to pay his gambling debts, until one day he refused to give him the large amount he had come for. Thereupon Roberto had, in a fit of rage, seized a newly finished violin and smashed it against the wall. The two brothers never saw each other again after that, even though the older brother had sent many letters of apology and even gone to plead at his younger brother's door.

A crippled beggar, who claimed to be the illegitimate son of a duke, patiently listened to all three stories and announced self-confidently that none of them was true. The master violin-maker had not committed suicide at all, whatever was thought. He did not jump from the window, he was thrown out of it. There was a third eye-witness to this tragedy, as well as the two baker's men. He was a beggar who had left town in a hurry immediately after the fateful event, fearing what he had seen, and pausing only long enough to confide in his lame friend.

The beggar had spent the night on the square and was



sleeping under some stairs, when he was awakened at daybreak by banging from somewhere above. He looked around drowsily, then realized that the noise was coming from the open window in the garret of the violin-maker's house. It seemed as if someone was trying to break something in there, but he could see nothing from below. Then everything quieted down and a brief silence reigned. Just as the two baker's boys arrived in the square from a side street, each carrying baskets full of freshly baked bread and rolls, the terrified maestro appeared at the window. He held tightly onto the frame, trying to resist whoever was pushing him from behind. It was a silent struggle, which was why the young men were completely unaware of it. They crossed the square, unsuspecting among the pigeons, chatting in low voices.

The unrelenting pressure on the maestro's back grew stronger and stronger until his resistance yielded. As if hurled by a huge hand, he flew out of the window and plunged helplessly towards the pavement, still without uttering a sound. Behind him, however, the window was not empty as it would have been had he jumped of his own free will. A terrifying figure appeared for just an instant, curling the blood in the observer's veins as he lay hidden under the stairs. It disappeared at once, but that fleeting look was enough for the beggar to recognize it beyond all doubt. He remained hidden for quite some time, not daring to move. It was only after the police inspector had completed his investigation and the dead man's body was removed that the beggar mustered the courage to come out.

It should surprise no one, the lame beggar concluded didactically, that Mr Tomasi finally fell victim to the Tempter. Anyone who pledges his soul to the Devil for the sake of some vain and evanescent acclaim must be assured that the Devil will get his due – sooner or later. The master violin-maker had no reason to complain; he had gloried for many years in his reputation as the unsurpassed creator of magnificent violins, although it was clear to everyone that such talent could not be natural.

That was when Mr Umbertini was first tempted to contribute a comment of his own. Unlike the other stories, this one was at least partially credible. The story-teller himself had probably been the eye-witness on the square that morning, rather than this nameless friend who had so conveniently disappeared. Most likely he was reluctant to admit it so as to avoid being questioned by the police, but he had given too many convincing details for one who was merely recounting another's experience. The supplementary parts that he had invented were understandable in the circumstances; without them his story would not have been exciting enough for the listeners in the tavern. On the other hand, although he could not have known, they were not completely unfounded. Nonetheless, the ex-assistant decided once again not to say anything, principally because of his unwillingness to enter into the inevitable discussion about this aspect of the maestro's accident, for the secret at its heart greatly surpassed his own understanding.

He might never have spoken about it at all, had his hand not been forced by an extraordinary chain of events. The vagabonds and good-for-nothings who kept him company in the tavern started to lose interest in the violin-maker's suicide as it became clear they would get nothing out of his former assistant. They also found the man himself less and less interesting, since he passed most of his time withdrawn into gloomy silence, concentrating on the bottle. They gradually started to drop away, finally leaving him alone at the table. At last only the large, bearded innkeeper sometimes exchanged a word or two with him.

One rainy day in late autumn, Mr Umbertini arrived at the tavern early, while there were still no other guests. He sat at a small table with two chairs in the corner, close to the hearth, and the innkeeper, without asking and giving just a brief nod, brought him three bottles of red wine and a glass. He peered briefly at his customer's thin, unshaven face, inflamed eyes and red nose, but said nothing. The innkeeper couldn't care less about the appearance of those who frequented his establishment as long as they had money to pay for what they ordered. It was not his job to warn immoderate drunks that every new glass only shortened what little life they had remaining. He picked up the coins that Mr Umbertini put on the table without a word and slipped them in the deep pocket under his stained apron, then went behind the bar.

Mr Umbertini was already halfway through the second bottle when new guests started to appear in the tavern. They were certainly not those he was accustomed to seeing there. First a little boy came in. He could not have been more than six or seven years old, but he went up to the largest table, sat at the head, took out a piece of paper and pen from somewhere, bowed his head and started to write something in a tiny script. From time to time he took out a handkerchief and held it briefly to his nose. After him came a middle-aged woman holding a bunch of rolled-up scrolls under her arm. She sat next to the boy, unrolled a scroll and became engrossed in reading. The refined-looking, older man who soon joined them brought a snow-white cat with him. He stroked it gently in his lap, whispering in its ear. The older woman who next arrived stood at the entrance, looking in bewilderment first at the innkeeper and then at the master violin-maker's assistant as though she had seen ghosts. She sat down stiffly on one of the three unoccupied chairs and put her muff on the table in front of her without taking her hands out of it. The man who came in after her was a painter. As soon as he joined the others he opened a large sketching block, took a stick of charcoal and started sketching in brisk, rough strokes. Finally, the last to arrive was a rather casually dressed man with dishevelled grey hair. He rummaged through his pockets for a few moments, finally found a piece of chalk and without the least hesitation began to write on the uncovered wooden table, erasing something here and there with the leather-patched elbow of his jacket.

The sight of six such strangers at the big table was extremely unusual in this establishment. During all the months that Mr Umbertini had spent in the tavern he had never seen anyone even slightly resembling them.

But what seemed to him almost as unbelievable was the fact that the innkeeper paid them absolutely no attention. He, who took great pains that no guest was ever left even momentarily without a glass or a plate on the table in front of him, who kept an eye on empty glasses in order to fill them at once, and never recoiled from showing the door to anyone who contemplated sitting inside for free, had not even approached these dignified guests, although they clearly promised a good tab. Instead, he went up to the assistant's table, waved at the other chair with the dirty rag he constantly wore over his arm, and sat down.

He came straight to the point. He maintained that he knew why Mr Tomasi had killed himself – a most unexpected statement as he had never taken part in the conversations on the subject. He had seemed totally uninterested, just idly listening to the stories told by others. The master violin-maker, the innkeeper now asserted, had wanted to make a perfect violin. He had invested years of effort and everything indicated that he was on the right track. Unfortunately, no human hands, not even the most gifted, are able to reach perfection. Although appearing perfect in every way, the violin was nonetheless not divine, as he had hoped. When he realized this after testing it that morning, the violin-maker understood that there was only one way out of this defeat, and he took it.

This time Mr Umbertini could hold back no longer. Had the innkeeper's story simply been wrong, he certainly would not have reacted, gliding over it as he had the others. But he had found one essential aspect of this story deeply offensive, and only he could now stand up to defend the maestro's besmirched honour. That was a debt he owed his teacher, and it rose above the pledge the assistant had made to himself never to reveal what had happened in the garret.

The innkeeper had been right, although Mr Umbertini could not even imagine how that simple and greedy seller of bad wine could have found out something which the maestro had kept secret even from his faithful pupil. For 18 years, with endless devotion and patience, he had indeed been working on a perfect violin. It was only towards the end that the assistant finally understood what lay hidden behind the violin-maker's periodic retreats to the highest room in the house. He would stay locked inside for hours, although he had taken no instrument with him to test, and no one dared to disturb him.

The innkeeper, however, was wrong when he said, with an edge of malice in his voice, that the master violin-maker had been unsuccessful in his efforts. Sneaking up to the garret on that fateful morning when the unique violin was given its final test, Mr Umbertini heard the sound of divine harmony for the first and only time in his life. Even though the closed door dampened the music, the magic of that experience had been so powerful that he had felt compelled to stay

close to the maestro's house instead of going somewhere else, where he might hope to enjoy a more useful and fulfilling life – even though he was conscious that he would never again be given an opportunity to hear it.

Mr Umbertini knew the question the innkeeper would ask next, just as he knew that he had no answer. If the maestro had truly created a perfect violin, what had happened to it? Or to its remains, if the crashing that the beggar on the square had heard meant that the maestro had broken it? (Although why would he do such a thing to his masterpiece?) When the inspector had forced the door, nothing was found inside: neither a whole instrument nor its wreckage. So, there must have been a secret entrance into the garret, concluded the cunning innkeeper, which the assistant had used before the inspector's arrival in order to remove all traces.

This was a logical assumption that offered an explanation for both possibilities: that the violin had been perfect and that it hadn't been. Its only defect was that it was incorrect. There was no secret entrance to the highest room in the building. When he finally entered the garret with the inspector, the assistant encountered his second wonder of that morning. Although the instrument had to be there, and in one piece, it was not. And the fact that it should have been in one piece constituted the first wonder.

As Mr Umbertini stood in front of the door, still dazzled by the music that had just ended, he suddenly heard something inside that terrified him. He was quite familiar with that sound. The crashing could mean only one thing: the master violin-maker was destroying his life's work! But why? Not knowing what else to do, the assistant quickly dropped to his knees and tried to peer inside through the keyhole. Had there been no key in the lock, he could have seen more, but even this way he was able to catch at least partial sight of the maestro's crazed figure as he swung the violin, holding it by the neck. He hit it against whatever he found: the table, chair back, bed-frame, walls.

Even though the full force of his unbridled rage went into it, the instrument was not in the least scratched. The violin steadfastly resisted all his attempts to shatter it, remaining untouched, as though he was merely swinging it through the air. When he threw it to the floor and started to jump on it, again without damaging it, he finally collapsed, sat on the edge of the bed, thrust his head in his hands and stayed there without moving for a while. And then he got up slowly, went to the large window, grabbed the frame, stayed in that position a few moments, then let go of his hands and simply leaned forward. The dumbfounded assistant took his eye off the keyhole and slid to the floor next to the door. It was not until the inspector banged the knocker on the front door of the house that he was startled out of his paralysis.

The innkeeper shook his head. Of all the stories he had heard, he said, this one seemed the most far-fetched. Thank heavens Mr Umbertini had not told it to

the police, because that would surely have focused suspicion on himself. He personally still thought that the only true explanation lay in the secret entrance. As far as the noise was concerned, it didn't have to come from breaking the violin, rather its maker might have banged the furniture around him in frustration over his failure, as people do when they are infuriated.

In any case, the innkeeper concluded, after the master violin-maker jumped through the window, Mr Umbertini had gone into the garret and stowed the instrument somewhere. He had waited for the situation to calm down, then sold it under the counter. The violin might not have been perfect according to Mr Tomasi's criteria, but the seller certainly would have received a pretty sum for it that would enable him to lead a comfortable life. For example, he could amuse himself at the tavern day after day without having to work. But Mr Umbertini had no need to worry. The innkeeper certainly would not turn him in. What benefit would that bring him? He would only be losing a regular customer who had never asked for credit.

Seeing there was nothing more to say, he returned to the bar. He started to wipe glasses idly, continuing to neglect the six visitors at the other table. They sat there briefly, involved in their preoccupations, and then, as though at an invisible signal, stood up and left the tavern together, probably offended at being so rudely ignored. Mr Umbertini watched them leave, and then, as though remembering something, quickly got up and

headed after them, leaving almost a bottle and a half of wine, paid for but not drunk. He was never seen in there again.

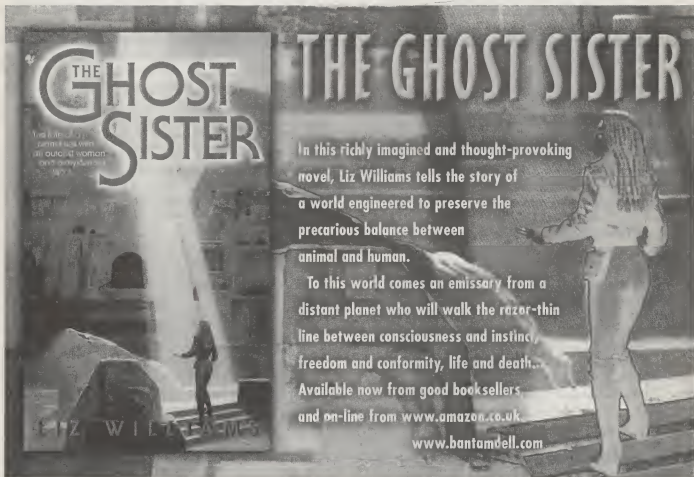
For a while stories were concocted in the tavern regarding his disappearance. It was heard with great reliability that thieves had slaughtered him and thrown him into the river, that he had left for the New World to seek his fortune, that he had opened his own workshop in another town, and that he had come down with leprosy and was now living the miserable remainder of his days in an asylum on some island. Only the sober innkeeper, who was not to be cheated, knew that they were all fabrications and that, as usual, the simplest explanation was the soundest: the late master violin-maker's assistant had fled, fearing that someone might denounce him to the police after he had spent all of his dishonestly acquired money.

Translated from the Serbian by Alice Copple-Tosic

Translation edited by Christopher Gilmore

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Zoran Živković is the subject of the interview that follows. The above piece is the seventh and last in his cycle of ever-so-slightly connected fantasies called *Seven Touches of Music* (now out as a small book in the author's native Serbia).



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The Challenge of Fiction

Zoran Živković interviewed by Tom Arden

Serbian author Zoran Živković has become a frequent contributor to these pages in recent years, with his bizarre, thought-provoking, often strangely elusive brand of tale-telling which teeters between fantasy and sf, philosophical fable and postmodernist literary fiction.

Živković may be a new voice to English-speaking readers, but is a much-published and distinguished writer, critic and translator in his own country. Born in Belgrade in 1948, his first book was *Contemporaries of the Future* (1983), a critical study of sf, based on his PhD thesis; while his earlier MA thesis on Arthur C. Clarke appeared in Belgrade as *First Contact* in 1985, and was re-published, in large part, in the February and March 2001 issues of *The New York Review of Science Fiction*.

Živković's other non-fiction books are *Starry Screen* (1984), a history of sf films, in connection with an 18-episode TV series he hosted in Yugoslavia; an *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1990) in two large volumes; and *Essays on Science Fiction* (1995), a selection of his essays from the previous 25 years.

He has produced seven books of fic-

tion so far, most available in English translation from his Belgrade-based publishing house, Polaris (polaris@eunet.yu): the novel *The Fourth Circle* (1993), winner of the prestigious Yugoslav Milos Crnjanski award in 1994; *Time Gifts* (1997), runner-up for the Yugoslav literary Oscar, the NIN award, and published in the US by Northwestern University Press; *The Writer* (1998); *The Book* (1999); *Impossible Encounters* (2000), serialized in *Interzone* 152-161; *Seven Touches of Music* (2001), which began in *IZ* 170 and concludes in the present issue; and *The Library* (2001).

TA: Let's begin with *Seven Touches of Music*. Like *Impossible Encounters*, this is a sequence of stories which appear at first to be unrelated, linked only by a particular motif – in this case, the encounter with music which brings a moment of revelation to the central character; in the final story, elements from the earlier stories are startlingly brought together. How did you devise this form of storytelling, and what attracted you to it?

ZZ: Here is what Ursula K. Le Guin said in one of her recent interviews:

"Listen, can I leave a question for the people reading? I think we need a name for a form that has always existed, but I think it's more popular than ever now: connected stories in one volume – stories which are separate short stories, but they have characters or theme or place or something in common. *Four Ways to Forgiveness* is an example of this – a collection that's actually something between a collection of short stories and a novel. I want to put this out there, because somebody's going to come up with a good name for this form." So, you see, I didn't actually devise this form of storytelling. It seems to be rather old, although still lacking a name. I just completed my fourth book of this type, *The Library*. It forms a sort of tetralogy with *Time Gifts*, *Impossible Encounters* and *Seven Touches of Music*. In English, *The Library* should be included in its entirety in the *Leviathan 3* anthology, edited by Jeff VanderMeer and Forrest Aguirre, due to come out in 2002.

Personally, I consider these four books novels, although I'm quite aware that this isn't very consistent with the traditional definition of this narrative form. Maybe it's just about

time to propose a new definition. Or, as Le Guin suggests, to coin an entirely new name. In any case, this particular form is a whole which is larger than the mere sum of its parts – an amalgam, not a conglomerate. For me as a writer, its most attractive feature is a chance to destabilize the reader's perception at the very end, to force the reader to return to the beginning and re-evaluate everything from a new perspective. Maybe even to read the book again.

TA: In *Seven Touches of Music*, music appears to be a metaphor for a meaning which is difficult to grasp. In "The Whisper" (IZ 170), an autistic boy who has previously spent art classes endlessly drawing circles (or zeroes) suddenly produces a sequence of meaningful numbers when Chopin is played; in "The Cat" (IZ 172), a tune from a musical box gives an old man a vision of an alternative life. In each story, these visionary moments seem fleeting, even tragic, and the final effect is one of mystery. Would you accept this as a description of the book?

ZŽ: Yes. Unfortunately, I can't elaborate on this, since I try to avoid the trap of interpreting my own fiction, but basically the idea was to use music in a way in which it is rarely used in the history of literature: as a demonic element providing people with some very precious moments of revelation, then depriving them of the opportunity of sharing with others what has been revealed to them. The crucial question, of course, is who is the hidden maestro pulling strings behind the scenes, thus producing this ambiguous music? A close, attentive reading of the penultimate story, "The Violinist" (IZ 175), could be very useful in trying to solve this mystery. Strangely enough, although it should be evident who served as a model for the protagonist of this story, the character mostly remains unrecognized...

TA: Well, I happen to know it's Albert Einstein. In this story, Einstein thinks he finally realizes the meaning of life, but the knowledge comes only on his deathbed, and the nurse doesn't understand his dying words. But compare these lines from "The Puzzle" (IZ 174): "If you're expecting a horseman you have to be very careful not to mistake your heartbeat for the beat of a horse's hoofs." Often you imply that the world is ordered and has meaning, but that we can't see it. Why is the human search for meaning so important in your fiction, and do you think this search is always doomed to be an ironic one?

ZŽ: What could be more noble and purposeful than our search for mean-

ing? This is fundamentally what we have been doing from time immemorial – at least some of us. First it was a theological domain, then philosophical. In modern times various other disciplines try to contribute their share to answering the so-called final questions – cosmology, I suppose, most prominently. I believe, however, that the art of writing also has something to say – maybe even something crucial – in this continuing debate. There are things that can't be properly expressed in any other way but in fiction. And one of the intrinsic and most important tools of prose is irony. At least, I seem to be very fond of it.

TA: In *Impossible Encounters*, you make considerable play with religious themes. For example, in "The Train" (IZ 157), the banker Mr Pohotny meets God in a first-class railway compartment. God reveals that He visits all of us once, while we are alive, and lets us ask him any question we like; unfortunately, we forget the meeting as soon as God is gone. "The Confessional" (IZ 159) is about the relationship between God and the Devil, which reveals that God is "not quite as almighty as people think." How do you see the role of religion in your work?

ZŽ: I am a man of doubt, not of faith. If there's one thing I believe in, it's equations – although extremely immaterial, they're the only solid foundation of my world. There are two principal reasons why I am not very intimate with religion. First, I don't need theology to face my mortality. I try to accept it as a part of the natural order of things, however tragic. Second, I don't need fear of God to be good. That kind of goodness doesn't really count. What does count is only goodness that comes as a matter of

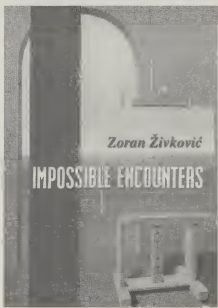
choice, through free will.

I'm not sure my position is quite atheistic, but it certainly enables me to play with religion in my fiction. Not to mock it – that would be inappropriate and even vulgar – but to ironize it. My story "The Train" is not about God at all; He is only a catalyst there. It's about Mr Pohotny ("Lusty") whose value system is, *sub specie eternitatis*, totally deformed, irrelevant. He is, as Dostoevsky put it, a "dead-born." Similarly, in "The Confessional," the real hero is the Devil who is sending a sinful, undeserving priest to Heaven in order to show God what an imperfect world He has created.

TA: Another theme which emerges strongly in *Impossible Encounters* is that of time, and the passing of human life. "The Window" (IZ 152) is about reincarnation, while in "The Cone" (IZ 155), a man meets a mysterious stranger who, it becomes clear, is himself as an old man. Meanwhile, your book *Time Gifts* is about a group of characters who, in various ways, are offered the chance to cheat the normal course of time. What is behind your fascination with time?

ZŽ: Not time itself, but our awareness of it is what ultimately defines our transient, ephemeral nature. I also think this is one of the three principal themes in the entire art of writing, beside love and death. What I intended to show in *Time Gifts* was that we couldn't escape its inexorability, even if we had a chance to cheat it. Protagonists of the first three stories are granted magical opportunities to see the future, to go back in time, even to change the past. All these "gifts" don't improve their tragic situations; on the contrary, after the gift is received, the protagonists are faced with an impossible choice – impossible in the sense that, whatever they choose, they lose. There's no way out of the time labyrinth. But *Time Gifts* is also a book about the responsibilities a writer has towards his characters. Strangely enough, that aspect of the book was mostly overlooked by reviewers.

TA: In "The Bookshop" (IZ 160), there's a wonderful description of the fading evening light: "One moment the world was there, real, visible, tangible; then, in what seemed like the twinkling of an eye it would magically dissolve in the humid breath of the river spirits." Your stories, too, have something of this evanescent quality. There's a timelessness about them, despite references to computers and other modern inventions; then, too, there's frequently a dreamlike quality, particularly in the various "impossible



encounters." Are dreams an important source of your writing? Are you interested in surrealism, or psychoanalytic ideas of the unconscious?

ZŽ: Dreams are indeed very important for my writing, or, to be more precise, what's important for me is the subconscious, which is their source. In my book *The Writer*, I tried to demonstrate what was hidden behind the very act of literary creation. In the protagonist's dream at the end of the novella, all his recent experiences are transformed into raw material for a future work of fiction. That process is never under the author's conscious control. I don't know how it is with other writers, but all my stories exist initially only as a series of still pictures. Under the frozenness of these images, however, an invisible turbulence bubbles and, inevitably, bursts forth. Perhaps it would be a more natural thing if I were a painter, but my art is built of words, and so this torrent comes as letters, masses of letters which should, as I hope in my vanity, re-form in the minds of my readers the images from which I started. I've failed hopelessly if that doesn't happen.

Something very odd happened with *The Fourth Circle*, my first work of fiction. The final, most complex episode, the pastiche of Sherlock Holmes, wasn't even an image at first. There was nothing, in fact. Then the text formed itself on the monitor, seemingly from nowhere. Much more than a writer, I was a reader, prodded by my own impatience to write as fast as I could, to find out as soon as possible what would happen in the end.

TA: Now that's interesting, because that reminds me of "The Atelier," the final *Impossible Encounters* story [IZ 161]. There, reality and fiction are turned on their heads. First, the characters from the earlier stories are revealed to be creations of the writer; the writer is then confronted by these characters, as if they were real. Fictional characters are like actors; we're made to think about what they do when they aren't playing their roles, and their relationship with their creators (I love the line, "No one knows an author as well as the characters from his own books"). All this suggests a postmodernist play with textuality, yet the story also expresses (perhaps ironically) a desire for literary transcendence which moves beyond the ironies of postmodernism, gesturing to "the faint hope of the writer that what he has written will afford him refuge from the ultimate void." Should we see these stories as postmodernist?

ZŽ: I'm truly obsessed by the role of the writer. In *Time Gifts* the pivotal

theme, as I already pointed out, is his responsibility. In *Impossible Encounters*, the writer escapes death by finding a sanctuary in his own fiction, joining his own characters. An author is the protagonist in *The Writer*; also, in my latest work, *The Library*, some obscure aspects of writing are introduced. This is probably a postmodern approach, but I don't feel very comfortable under that roof. You correctly noticed that I try to move beyond the ironies of postmodernism. I simply don't accept its destructiveness. The evanescent, dreamlike qualities of my fiction that you mentioned before are simply not compatible with it.

TA: I'd like to ask about your critical work. You were a pioneering of scholar in former Yugoslavia. Could you tell me about your academic background? Did you encounter resistance from the academic establishment?

ZŽ: I was just one of the pioneering of scholars in former Yugoslavia. One of the most prominent names, well known in the West, is Dr Darko Suvin, who was editor of *Science-Fiction Studies* for many years. When I proposed my MA thesis back in 1978 ("Anthropomorphism as a Factor of Incoherence in the SF Works of Arthur C. Clarke"), what I encountered was not so much resistance but indifference from the academic establishment. I think they didn't even realize that it was science fiction. Fortunately, my mentor was determined to help me introduce this entirely new area of study.

Four years later it was somewhat easier with my PhD thesis ("The Origins of Science Fiction as a Genre of Literary Fiction"). All went rather smoothly because by that time I was already generally recognized as an

expert in science fiction, although I never got a chance to obtain an academic position. To be honest, I didn't try hard enough, because I soon became involved in a project that lasted more than five years. Its final product was my *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*: two volumes, 936 pages, 1638 entries, almost 2,000 black-and-white illustrations, 64 full-colour pages. At the time of its appearance, 1990, it was only the fourth book of that kind in the world. Unfortunately, it is very much outdated now, but I have no intention whatsoever to update it. One encyclopedia is just about enough for one human lifetime.

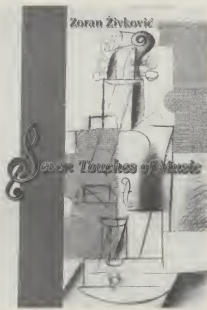
TA: So how did it come about? I gather that you wrote it all yourself, which seems a remarkable achievement.

ZŽ: Writing an encyclopedia of sf originally seemed to me the ultimate challenge, and indeed, what could be more ambitious? I was then in my mid-30s, a young, vain, unreasonable man, and I think I hadn't initially realized the real dimensions of the project. Once started, however, there was no retreat from it. It was five long years of solitary work, eight to ten hours a day. A total, fanatic devotion. Metaphorically speaking, I was a mountain climber, concentrating on small uphill steps, without ever having the courage to look up to the summit because its undiminishing distance would very probably have discouraged me from any further progress.

When I finally reached the top, my feelings were ambiguous. I was overwhelmed by a sense of relief and achievement, but at the same time I understood, at last, that this really should not have been a one-man show – this is not the way an encyclopedia should be written. It's something for large, well-organized teams of experts. Besides, it turned out to be something of a luxury in Serbian culture. We still lack our national encyclopedia. But I couldn't wait for my compatriots to do first things first.

TA: All this took place back in the communist era in Yugoslavia. At that time, did you feel restricted in any way as a writer or critic, in terms of what subjects you could address and how you could address them?

ZŽ: The Yugoslav version of communism was rather different from that in the Soviet-bloc countries, far less restrictive and rigid. Don't forget that we were free to travel abroad as much as we liked. In fact, the Yugoslav passport from the Tito era was a very precious item on the international black market. It enabled its owner to enter all but a few countries in the world



without a visa – quite opposite from the situation today, where there are just a few countries left that I can enter without a visa. Personally, as an intellectual, I never had a conflict with the ruling communist establishment, mainly because they never saw science fiction as any cause for alarm. Back in the 1950s and 1960s there were a few dissident Yugoslav writers, but they mostly used that status to promote their otherwise worthless fiction.

TA: You've written extensively about Arthur C. Clarke. As you say, he was the subject of your MA thesis, and a version of the thesis recently appeared in the *New York Review of Science Fiction*. What is Clarke's importance for you, and how do you rate him as a writer?

ZŽ: Although extremely popular among general readers (in Serbian translation, he's the most popular sf author of all time), Sir Arthur is still unjustifiably underestimated and even neglected by academic critics. This is mostly due to a prejudice that he's primarily a science popularizer. A closer, more attentive reading of his sf work would reveal, however, a very sophisticated writer. His contribution to one of the most immanent sf motifs, First Contact, is indeed enormous. In my MA thesis I analyzed three of his stories and a novella of this type: "Report on Planet Three," "Crusade," "History Lesson" and "A Meeting with Medusa." I was very proud to see my essay on Sir Arthur finally published in English in 2001, the Clarke year. I sent him the copies of the *New York Review of Science Fiction* containing my piece and, judging by his response, he seemed rather pleased.

TA: What about your PhD thesis? I'm intrigued by the title, "The Origin of Science Fiction as a Genre of Literary Fiction" (later published as *Contemporaries of the Future*). Many English-language critics would dispute that sf is a form of "literary fiction" even now, and arguments about the merits of "literary" versus "genre" fiction (and whether genre fiction deserves any literary respect) are commonplace in the English-speaking world.

ZŽ: Sf, at its best, is most certainly literary fiction. What I examined in my PhD thesis was a unique phenomenon in the whole history of literature. In a very short span of seven to eight years, 1950 to 1957, a previously hopelessly paraliterary genre suddenly became a prominent part of the mainstream through such works as Sturgeon's *More than Human*, Clarke's *Childhood's End*, Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles*, Pohl and Kornbluth's *Space Merchants*, Asimov's *I*,

Robot, Simak's *City* and Blish's *The Seedling Stars*, to mention just a few examples. Nothing similar happened to any other form of so-called trivial literature. How could anyone seriously deny the highest literary value to *The Left Hand of Darkness* or *The Dispossessed* by Le Guin, *Solaris* or *The Invincible* by Stanislaw Lem, or *The Snail on the Slope* or *Roadside Picnic* by the Strugatsky brothers? These are pillars of 20th-century world literature. In his excellent book *The Western Canon*, Harold Bloom includes almost all of these novels in his list of the greatest literary achievements of the modern era. I think any sf work should have the highest possible literary aspirations. That certainly won't harm its sf nature.

TA: In 1984 you hosted *Starry Screen*, a series on sf for Yugoslav television (parallel with the series, you also produced a richly-illustrated book of the same title). Could you tell me about this series?

ZŽ: *Starry Screen* had a subtitle: "Eight Decades of SF Cinema." Each of the 18 fifteen-minutes episodes was about one sf movie which, in my view, had a special place in the history of sf cinematography, from Georges Méliès's *A Trip to the Moon* to Gerald Potterton's *Heavy Metal*. The series was a great success on Yugoslav national television, and re-broadcast as many as seven times. Last time it was on was in 1996, without my consent, while I was protesting every day outside the national TV building in Belgrade against Milosević's horrible media propaganda. I published an open letter in one of the daily newspapers, demanding that further showings be stopped, but in vain. Recently I got an offer to do another set of eight to ten

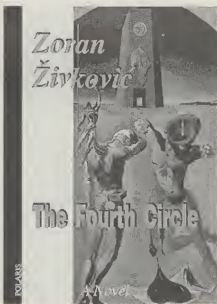
episodes to cover the remaining two decades of 20th-century sf cinema, but, as with the encyclopedia, I simply have no time for that any more. My principal interest now is fiction writing.

TA: Let's go back to your fiction. Stylistically, it seems very different (refreshingly so) from much American and British sf or fantasy. Who are the major influences on your work? Do you see yourself as coming from a different tradition from English-language sf?

ZŽ: I see sf as an international tradition. This maybe isn't so evident to English-language readers, primarily owing to the paucity of translated works. On the other hand, English-language sf is extensively translated abroad. This makes for an imbalance: we know much more about you than you know about us. But the situation is slowly changing and I'm glad that I'm modestly contributing to it. My fiction is now available to British and American readers and I'm very proud to note that it seems to be well received by them – in any case, beyond all my expectations.

You know, life is not at all comfortable for a foreign writer trying to get published in the English-language magazine or book market. First of all, you have to win against very, very strong competition; then, you have to provide an excellent English translation of your work, which implies a substantial investment, often higher than any fee you could hope for. But there are no shortcuts here, I'm afraid. I think what appealed mostly to *Interzone* readers about my writing was what you described as its quality of being "refreshingly different." Sometimes even the most developed sf and fantasy environment can only benefit from a new, outside voice. But I wouldn't like to be permanently treated as an alien. I'd be really glad if I'm finally accepted as one of you, because this is what I am as a writer. My style was predominantly formed through extensive reading of British and American sf, and a close scrutiny, I guess, would determine various influences. Your sf and fantasy tradition is so unimaginably rich. I learned from many magnificent masters, but if I have to choose one to whom I owe most, directly and indirectly and in various ways, that certainly would be Mike Moorcock.

TA: Your novel *The Fourth Circle* (1993) is an extraordinary work – at times hilariously funny, often outrageous (a very explicit sequence about the sex life of Stephen Hawking comes to mind), bewilderingly complex, and generally bizarre. How would you



describe this novel to those who haven't read it?

ZŽ: Let me quote the blurb for the English-language edition: "What could a computer wizard self-exiled in an abandoned Buddhist temple possibly have in common with the humble servant of a medieval fresco painter? What is the link between the enigmatic mission of a giant radio telescope and a tribe of spherical beings who dwell in a world full of unearthly scents and herbs? What will bring four great scientists from various centuries – Archimedes, Ludolph van Ceulen, Nikola Tesla and Stephen Hawking – to the same spot in time? What has this got to do with Rama, a female computer program, impregnated by a strange ape? And, above all, why is it necessary for Sherlock Holmes and Moriarty to join forces so that the *Fourth Circle* can finally be closed?"

I hope this is provocative enough for potential readers (the blurb was written by the author and publisher, of course). There's only one thing I'd like to add: the character of Stephen Hawking in *The Fourth Circle* is in absolutely no way related to the real person. I've the greatest possible esteem for the celebrated British physicist whose books *A Brief History of Time* and *Black Holes and Baby Universes* I had the privilege of translating into Serbian. All four above-mentioned heroic personalities are only fictional creations in my book. This is a legitimate technique, often used in postmodern prose!

TA: You've mentioned translation. Could you tell me about your career as a translator?

ZŽ: I don't think I'll translate very much in the future, but in the past I've translated more than 50 books, mostly from English (and a few from Italian). The vast majority were by British and American sf authors, including 16 books by Arthur C. Clarke, seven by Ursula Le Guin, six by Isaac Asimov, three by Frank Herbert. The list also includes titles by Michael Moorcock, Anthony Burgess, Poul Anderson, Clifford Simak, Richard Matheson, Robert Silverberg, Carl Sagan...

I always selected the books to be translated. As a rule, I chose titles that I particularly liked. Translation is a demanding, complex and time-consuming job, and the sf context very often requires a high degree of inventiveness on the part of the translator. But I see now my long, long hours devoted to translation as a very important element in forming me as a writer. These were very precious years of learning. Here, again, I have neither the time nor the challenge any more.

TA: You said earlier that *The Fourth Circle* was your first work of fiction. Was this literally the case, or were you writing fiction before that?

ZŽ: I found the courage to start writing prose fiction only after a longish walk through my 40s. Not that I recommend this to others as the optimal time in life to become a writer, but experience has taught me not to believe too much in literary *wunderkinder*. Before you decide to write something serious, you must read a horrendous number of texts by others. No shortcuts either: the preparation work must be laid down solidly. After having finished my encyclopedia, I had to find another appropriate challenge. And the new ultimate challenge was, of course, fiction writing. Something similar happened to Umberto Eco, I guess.

The Fourth Circle was a sort of eruption; experience accumulated for decades forced itself out in a volcanic way. One of my rare privileges is that I'm not restricted by any publisher's classifications and demands, since I publish my own books in my Polaris imprint. I never intended *The Fourth Circle* to be a work with any genre prefix. Some critics saw it as "a science-fiction masterpiece," for others it was "a postmodern rhapsody." For me it was just a novel.

TA: And I note that on the cover of its American edition, your book *Time Gifts* is described as "a meditation on the nature of time," with the terms "science fiction" and "fantasy" nowhere mentioned. Do you see such labels as limiting?

ZŽ: Such labels are most definitely limiting if they're stuck to a publisher's drawer. What I write is one of the many forms of fantasy, but such

"I will try, as hard as I can, to delete the spring of AD 1999 from my memory. To forget about fear, anger, frustration, despair, ruins, dead bodies, lack of electricity, water, food, gasoline, lack of perspective, lack of hope. But some episodes – good and bad – will stubbornly refuse to be erased."

"The Chinese embassy is just across the street from where I live. Even if I were writing this in my native language, I would not have the words to describe the experience of that alleged accidental bombing. All our windows and doors to the balcony facing the street were blasted out, together with their frames. It was incredible luck that nobody was injured, although we all – myself, my wife Mia and our twin boys of 18 – found ourselves on the floor, amid overturned furniture and broken glass. It took us a couple of days of strong sedatives to recover, but I am sure some invisible scars will remain permanently. Now, I start quite involuntarily even at the sound of a distant door slam..."

"On a heavy and overcast Friday afternoon not long ago the National Theatre gave an open-air performance of *The Taming of the Shrew*. I went with Mia; admission was free. In the middle of the third act the rain began. Soon it was pouring down, a real summer tempest. But nobody left. The actors carried on, their make-up running, their costumes soaked. It was hard to see through the rain, and hard to hear through the thunderclaps. And then, quite suddenly, as if the whole spectacle were not irrational enough, the air-raid sirens sounded. A moment of deep silence from the audience, and from the actors. The actors continued. There was a strong, almost explosive applause from the rest of us. Eros had triumphed over Thanatos; Life had defeated Death; laughter had overcome tears. We were all completely wet, and getting cold. The bombs could have started falling on us at any moment, but we didn't care. I experienced one of the most precious moments of sheer happiness in my whole life. I knew then we were on the winning side. They – Milošević, Nato, KLA and the rest of them – can physically eliminate us all, but they are not able even to scratch our spirit."

– Zoran Živković
The Independent on Sunday
13 June 1999



categories aren't really important. My work won't be any better or worse if it carries a genre trademark. The only thing that matters, here and in any other fiction, is the quality of the writing. To some extent I can understand the reluctance of my American publisher to use the terms "science fiction" and "fantasy" in describing *Time Gifts*. That's their publishing policy. It wasn't me who opposed it. Actually, nobody ever asked me about it.

TA: Tell me about your Polaris imprint – and is the Polaris sf bookshop, which features in "The Bookshop" [JZ 160], in fact a real place?

ZŽ: I'm afraid there's no such bookshop, except in "The Bookshop" – it was a kind of homage to my imprint. The real Polaris was founded in 1982, and was the first privately-owned publishing house in former Yugoslavia. In the following two decades it brought out almost 200 titles, predominantly science fiction – by all standards the biggest sf series ever in the Serbian language. Unfortunately, Polaris is now in a state that could be euphemistically described as "temporary hibernation." There's more than one reason for that. First of all, the print-runs became extremely limited due to the rather gloomy economic situation in Yugoslavia after 13 years of devastating Milosevic rule. Very few people can afford to buy books nowadays. But even if the circumstances were very favourable, I think I'd have given up the publishing business anyway. It's a time-consuming job which wouldn't give me enough opportunities for writing.

TA: How big is the sf scene in your country – in terms of fandom, as well as publishing?

ZŽ: The sf scene in my country is currently rather modest. There are a couple of sf societies in Belgrade with quite a limited membership. They try, however, to organize at least one convention annually, and publish sporadically a fanzine called *Emitor*. With Polaris in hibernation, there are practically no sf publishing activities now in Yugoslavia. The sf books that appear from time to time have a print-run of 300 to 500 copies at most and it takes a long time to sell even that minor amount. (What's really tragic is the fact that the situation is not substantially better in any other area of publishing.) I am, however, not altogether pessimistic about the future of sf in this part of the world. When (or should I say if) the economic situation improves, there'll be a stronger demand for sf books and that will contribute to the general welfare of

the sf scene. As for television and film, I guess the situation is the same as everywhere else: sadly dominated by mediocre (not to use a stronger word) Hollywood productions.

TA: You remained in Belgrade throughout the NATO bombing campaign. In a remarkable article published in *The Independent on Sunday*, you described your experiences at that time, perhaps summed up by the grafito you cite from a wall in Belgrade, "In the sky NATO, on the ground Milosevic." What are your feelings about that period now?

ZŽ: These were very sad times indeed, and I would rather not remember them. When I do, however, I see them through a sort of filter. I try to forget death, destruction, hopelessness, the impossible situation Milosevic brought us into: to get involved in a totally senseless war against 18 nations which have always been our natural allies. What comes back to me from the spring of 1999 is a feeling of mutual solidarity, of unexpected kindness, of a very peculiar humour. Indeed, precisely at that time I wrote my most humorous novella, *The Book*, a kind of satire narrated from the point of view of books who mostly complain about their sad and troublesome co-existence with humans. It isn't yet available in English translation, but it will be soon. Critics here described *The Book* as "hilarious," yet it was written almost entirely during the NATO campaign.

TA: In Britain, the playwright Harold Pinter has been a prominent voice in speaking out against the Milosevic trial, claiming it has no legitimacy

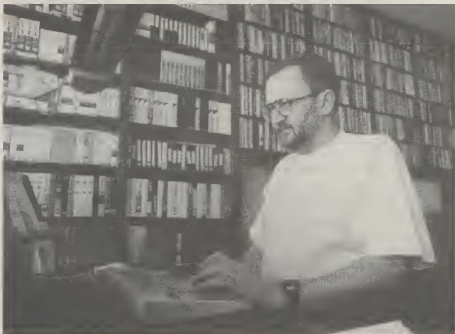
under international law and is simply (like the NATO campaign) another hypocritical exercise in Western imperialism. What's your view on this?

ZŽ: The West had by no means clean hands in what happened in the Balkans during the 1990s. But everything would have been different if the Serbian leader hadn't been Milosevic. He was a paradigmatic example of a communist tyrant obsessed by mere power. Nothing new in history: an extreme case of Machiavellianism. He was simply not able to understand that the times had changed, and that in a new world there was no place for the likes of him. I am, of course, very pleased that he is now in the Hague, where he might become a rather embarrassing witness against the West.

I believe the vast majority of my compatriots feel the same. Milosevic should consider himself very fortunate, because if he'd been tried here, he wouldn't be spending the remainder of his days in a reasonably comfortable and decent prison cell. The greatest harm he's done is to his own people, and for these crimes he will pass unpunished. But enough about Milosevic. Life is too precious to be spoiled by such irrelevant individuals. Who will remember him once the Hague trial is over?

TA: Finally, what of your own future as a writer?

ZŽ: I'm a proverbially bad prophet, especially when my own future is concerned. I can only hope I'll keep writing. This is the final mountain I'll try to climb up. Its summit, however, is nowhere in sight. 12



Elysian Dreams

Alexander Glass

It was a year of his life, but he gave it gladly. When the ship's Avatar woke him, Eduardo had been dreaming of his new home, the home he would share with 2,000 other believers, the home that was taking shape even as they sailed together through the void: Elysium. It was a peaceful dream, and when he woke, he found that a smile had settled on his lips.

He opened his eyes to see the petioles of the stasis cocoon lifting away from him, and Brother Gerhardt standing over him, his brow creased by a frown. Strange that the older man should look so mournful: his year as the Keeper of Souls was at an end, and all he need do now was close his eyes, and rest. He could rejoin the other sleepers, suspended in a state of blissful oblivion until they reached their destination. He had escaped the Wrath, the Judgment that was taking place on Earth. When he woke, it would be beneath bright Elysian sunlight, in a lush green field, at the mouth of a peaceful village. A soft breeze would caress his face. The taste of honey would linger on his lips.

Eduardo took a breath of rust-flavoured air, and grimaced at the taste. It felt as if his mouth was bleeding. With some difficulty, numbed by the years in stasis, he hauled himself up, accepting Gerhardt's proffered hand. The room was spinning about him slowly, and yet more slowly, until it finally spun to a halt. The floor was cold beneath his feet, the chill aching up from the damp iron grille, through his skin, to the bone. He was glad of it. It helped to clear his mind.

"Are you all right?" Gerhardt was staring at him, his

slender arms folded across his chest.

Eduardo inclined his head. "Give me a moment."

"I was very sick when I awoke. I was hungry – so hungry, I believe I could have eaten one of the sleepers – but I ate too soon after rising. The nausea passed, and the fever, but I was very frightened."

Eduardo interrupted, breaking into what seemed to be the opening phrases of a monologue. "You seem uncomfortable, Brother. Was the year very long?"

For a moment, Gerhardt was silent. Then he said in a lower voice: "Perhaps I should tell you nothing. Alyssa, who woke me, told me nothing, though I knew she seemed... different, somehow."

Eduardo stared at him. "Tell me."

Gerhardt took a breath, loud and harsh in the stillness. "I was alone, utterly alone. I thought that would be the worst of it, and perhaps not so very bad. After all, I had the Memories, and the Avatar, to sustain me. And my work, of course. But it was worse, much worse, than I had imagined."

"Worse?" Eduardo gnawed at his lip.

"No, no. I don't know. I can't say." Gerhardt closed his eyes for a moment. Then: "I'll tell you this: there were... temptations."

Eduardo said nothing. He felt a chill that had nothing to do with the iron floor beneath his feet, or the cold breeze that wandered the corridors. So, he thought, they had brought him with them. The Adversary. How naive he had been, to assume that they could leave him behind on Earth, to hope that these 2,000 souls were all immac-

ulate, free from the stain of sin. He wondered who the carrier was. Someone who seemed innocent, of course; perhaps someone who knew nothing of the evil they carried. For a brief moment he allowed himself to wonder whether he himself might be the one, the carrier. Then he thrust the thought away. This was no time for doubt.

"What did you do?" he asked, softly.

Gerhardt lifted his shoulders, miserably. "What could I do? I was alone. I couldn't seek out the Adversary alone. I was afraid."

Eduardo murmured: "Perhaps he isn't here at all. Perhaps he is back on Earth."

"Acting at a distance?"

Eduardo opened his hands. "Why not? We are breaking free. We are sailing to Elysium. This is his last attempt to snare us, to drag us back. And his influence will wane as we near our new home. Each Keeper will have an easier task than the one before. My year alone will not be as dark as yours. Yours was not as dark as Alyssa's."

Gerhardt lifted eagerly. "And when we come to Elysium..."

"He won't be able to reach us there."

Gerhardt clasped his hands together, shuddering with relief.

Later, as he watched the older man's cocoon fold its soft leaves over his body, Eduardo allowed himself a moment of grief. He had lied to his friend, to protect him from the truth. They had not left the Adversary behind. He was sure of that. Now that he was fully awake, he could feel the presence of something inhuman, something evil, on the ship. A drifting shadow, an icy breath. It would have done Gerhardt no good to think of it any longer. Better that he sleep, and be rested when they came to Elysium. He might need his strength, then, if Eduardo could not find the carrier during his year as Keeper.

What had Gerhardt been thinking? He had been the Keeper of Souls. It was his duty to seek out any sign of the Adversary, and destroy it. It was his only duty, and he had failed in it. If all the Keepers failed as badly, Elysium, too, would face the Wrath. Not immediately, perhaps not for generations; but one day it would be destroyed, just as Earth was being destroyed. Yet he could not blame his friend too much. He felt the same dread. At least Gerhardt had found the courage to warn him, to prepare him for the year of struggle ahead.

There was a subtle wrongness about the ship. The air tasted wrong. The sighing breeze that cut through the empty iron chambers carried the taint of the Adversary upon it. And he had dreamed. It had been a good dream, perhaps a sign, a prophecy; but there should have been no dreams in stasis.

The cocoon let out a hiss as the petioles sealed themselves in place.

Wrapping his robes about him, Eduardo turned away, and set out through the darkened hallways, his footsteps echoing behind him.

The Avatar had been corrupted. A month into his year

as Keeper, he was as certain of this as he was of the presence of the Adversary. Of course, it had no soul to lose, and so no soul to save, which was why someone must stay awake, and watch over the souls of those who slept; but like any machine, he supposed, it could be turned from its true purpose.

He summoned it to his sleeping chamber. It grew from a point of light in the air, to a glowing cloud, a veil of bright blue smoke; then the veil parted, and fell away to reveal the face of a man, old and white-bearded but still apparently vigorous. There was no body; only the hologram of a head, floating in the centre of the room, waiting for his command.

"Are we still on course?"

The Avatar inclined its head. "We shall come to Elysium in 800 years."

Eduardo shivered. The time they would spend in the void still unnerved him. "Can you be diverted from that course?"

"Only if Elysium were to cease to exist, or to become uninhabitable. Neither of these things has happened."

"But something is wrong."

The Avatar blinked at him. "Nothing is wrong."

"The air tastes strange. Like blood."

"It is a slight residue of iron oxide. There has been some deterioration of the ship's central skeleton. This is inevitable. I repair all damage as it occurs. We are in no danger."

"A wind blows through the corridors. I can hear it now, sighing outside the door."

"The air must be recycled," the Avatar explained. "Even if only the Keeper is awake, there must still be fresh air in every chamber."

Eduardo nodded, staring at the ground. The Avatar could not lie. But it was not infallible. It could be fooled into believing that all was well. He had checked their course himself: Elysium was still ahead of them, the Wrath still receding as they travelled. The sleepers remained in their cocoons, unharmed, the Avatar keeping their bodies frozen in time. It seemed the Avatar was carrying out its instructions to the letter; yet Eduardo could not rid himself of his conviction that some corruption had occurred. For the Avatar could not answer his most pressing question: why had he been dreaming in stasis?

"I have no information on this phenomenon."

"No. We aren't supposed to dream."

"Did your dreams distress you?"

"No." Another odd thing. "I was dreaming of our destination."

There were 800 years yet, before they reached Elysium. Eight hundred more sleepers to be woken. The ship was a little less than half-way through its journey; already, some 500 men and women had served as Keeper of Souls. The remaining 700 sleepers were either too old or too young for the task.

One of these souls was the carrier, the bearer of a seed, a tiny mote of the Adversary. Eduardo now had eleven months to find out which. Of the 2,000 sleepers, he could eliminate those who had already served as Keeper of

Souls; a Keeper could have halted their journey, perhaps turning them back to face the Wrath, perhaps destroying the ship altogether. That left him with 1,500 sleepers to consider.

He found himself calculating how many he would need to interrogate each day, to complete his task before his year was up. Eleven months was approximately 330 days. Say 300 – then he would have a month to investigate further. He had to be sure. He could not afford to make a mistake. That came to five souls each day. Too many, far too many. He could not question five, and pray for the health of all the rest.

Perhaps he would have to leave the task unfinished: interrogate as many as he could, and allow the next Keeper to continue the task. But he found he wanted to complete the job himself. It was his duty, after all. He must not fail in it. And he must not waste any more time – already a month had passed, and all he had done was worry, and wonder what he should do. He began to understand Brother Gerhardt's trepidation: the task was immense, terrifying, too great a burden for anyone to handle alone.

He began that same evening. The Avatar – reluctantly, he thought – activated a Memory of an old friend, Trude, from storage. With a faint sigh, its face dissolved into smoke, re-forming in the shape of Trude's angular features. When it spoke, it spoke in Trude's gentle voice.

"Eduardo. I wondered whether you would call for me."

"I wish I didn't have to call you," Eduardo replied somberly.

"Why?"

"Because the Adversary is here. Gerhardt told me the news when I woke. He has done nothing yet; but I can feel his presence."

The Memory was silent for a moment. Then: "What will you do?"

"What I must. I am searching for the carrier."

Again the Memory was silent. At last it asked him: "Am I the first you have called?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then you are sure I am not the carrier."

Eduardo frowned. "You are right. I must find the last souls I would call, the ones I cannot be certain of."

He waved his hand through the hologram. Trude's Memory smiled as it faded away. Gnawing at his lip, Eduardo summoned the Memory of Thomas Myerson. When he took shape, he was already smiling his mocking smile.

"Eduardo. What do you want?"

"Your soul. The Adversary is on board, and your soul is the carrier."

The Memory scowled. "Don't be a fool."

"Who else could it be? Who else but the man who laughed at Elysium, who denied the Wrath, who hardly even believes in the Adversary?"

"I never said we should stay on Earth, Eduardo. But I doubt that the planet is suffering the Wrath of God. Our own actions made it the place it is."

"And when I spoke of Elysium, you laughed."

"I wasn't laughing at Elysium. I was laughing at you.

You want to pretend it will be a paradise. It won't. Even after the terraforming, even after the drones have built our villages, it won't be a paradise. It will be a pleasant place to live. A temperate climate, gravity just below Earth's..."

"And the absence of the Adversary, of course."

The Memory curled its lip. "The Adversary is always with us, Eduardo. He's with you now. He's in your head."

Eduardo closed his eyes. "I knew it. I knew you were the one. Of course it had to be you."

"What do you mean?"

"The Adversary has a sense of irony. He places a mote of himself in the soul of an unbeliever. Why are you part of our Brotherhood at all?"

"Because I was born into it, Eduardo. It was force of habit. I was too lazy to change. Of course, the Brotherhood did some good work on Earth. It saved many lives, and improved many others. It had the resources to do good. I was willing to remain part of it, so that I, too, could do some good."

"I am sorry."

"Don't be. As soon as you woke me, I guessed what would happen. Your mind was already made up."

"I suppose," Eduardo said softly, "that you think God is only in my head."

"In all of our heads. I can't deny the possibility of his existence, but it seems unlikely to me. But what does it matter? As long as you live a good life, I don't care what you believe."

Shaking his head sadly, Eduardo waved the Memory away.

He could hardly believe it had been so easy.

A short while later, he had found the man's cocoon. He stood for a moment, free from doubt, watching the faint glow of the petioles fade slowly away, into darkness. Myerson did not wake. He did not move or struggle. He would never even know that he had died. Eduardo closed his eyes and muttered a brief prayer. The Avatar floated behind him, its face empty of expression.

Turning away from the shell that had been Thomas Myerson, Eduardo said harshly: "Jettison the body."

"It would be best to recycle it," the Avatar suggested.

"No. He is the carrier. We can't take the risk of bringing the Adversary to Elysium. Even if his body is recycled, some fragment of his soul might remain."

"I know nothing of souls," the Avatar told him – an automatic response. "But I will do as you command."

Eduardo nodded. He felt suddenly tired and weak. He found himself trembling as he made his way back to his chamber. The ship was safe, now. Elysium was safe. He could spend a year in peace, keeping watch over the souls of the sleepers. Then he could sleep, his ordeal forgotten; and when he woke, he would be in paradise.

He could not sleep that night. He dozed, eventually, sinking into the shallows of sleep, and into dreams of Elysium – but an Elysium turned sour, glowing with a strange half-light, its skies boiling with steel-grey clouds; an Elysium that had been made to face the Wrath.

He sat up, suddenly struck by doubt. Not about Myer-

son – the man had been a carrier, he was sure. But the air still tasted wrong, and the wind still moaned through the empty corridors; and the Avatar still had no explanation for his stasis dream.

What if there were more than one carrier?

He sat with his head cradled in his hands, listening to the whisper of the Adversary in the empty hallways, praying that he could stave off despair long enough to find a way to save himself.

They each carried a mote of the Adversary in their souls. All but him. Not all were as obvious as Myerson, of course. Some refused to believe in the resurrection. Others refused to believe in the virgin birth. As he called up Memory after Memory, he slowly grew more and more adept at finding signs of the Adversary. Some of the sleepers refused to keep the proper fasts; others misread their prayers. As he worked his way down the list, he found many whose souls appeared flawless in their devotion, but who gave themselves away by a telltale lack of enthusiasm. They were lying, he could tell, when they spoke of their devotion: their mouths formed the words, but their hearts were elsewhere, wrapped about by evil. Others were too ardent in their declarations of faith, too desperate to prove that they were free of sin. Desperate to live.

By the time he had come to the last few sleepers – he had left his own friends until the end, less out of loyalty than from fear of what he might find – he was numbed by what he had learned. The children were the most frightening of all: their glib recitation of the Creed, their refusal to even pretend to believe, was a measure of the Adversary's power.

Gerhardt pleaded with him, begged, telling him he was mistaken. Trude said nothing, but her Memory looked at him, its glimmering blue eyes wide and bright, and Eduardo had to look away.

He called up the Avatar for the final time.

"Erase the Memory of Thomas Myerson. If his soul was tainted, his Memory might keep something of that stain."

The Avatar stared at him. "It seems unlikely. I know nothing of souls – but my records tell me that the Memories have none."

"What can I do, then? Switch off all the cocoons, jettison all the bodies, and sit here alone in a ship full of ghosts?"

"Memories," the Avatar said, simply. "Not ghosts."

"We should turn back. We are carrying the Adversary to Elysium. We should bear him back to Earth, to face the Wrath."

"I have discovered a possible reason for your dreams in stasis," the Avatar told him. "You did not dream while you were actually in stasis; but you may have dreamed while in transition, entering stasis, or leaving it. There is some pseudo-random firing of neurones as the brain shuts down, and also as it emerges into consciousness again. That is the most likely explanation for the phenomenon, although I have had no opportunity to test the theory empirically."

Eduardo was not listening. "I will go back into the

cocoon. You will put my body into stasis, like the rest. Then you will Jettison the entire unit into the void. There is no other way."

"The units are not designed to be self-sustaining," the Avatar warned him. "You will drift for a time, and then you will die."

Eduardo took a deep breath, filling his lungs with cold, blood-tainted air.

"So be it. Elysium is doomed. The Adversary has already closed his fist around it. I failed as Keeper of Souls – but I was destined to fail. I have done what I could."

Dismissing the Avatar, he made his way to his cocoon, glad to be leaving the Adversary behind. Perhaps, as he made the transition into stasis, he would dream of Elysium again. The dream would have to be enough.

Alexander Glass lives in London, and is still in his 20s. His previous stories for *Interzone* include "Carla's Eye" (issue 130), "The Mirror Repair'd" (issue 139), "Grandma's Bubble and the Speaking Clock" (issue 143), "The Watcher's Curse" (issue 162), "The Eaters" (issue 164) and "Lucid" (issue 175).

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One of those questions that only occurs when you see it up on screen is how Nazgûl sniff when they haven't got faces. ("I say, I say, my Ringwraith's got no nose." "Your Ringwraith's got no nose? How does he smell?" "I've no idea, but his horse's arse absolutely mings.") This probably explains why they can't snuffle out three hobbits under a bank 30 inches away, or in the room next door in the Prancing Pony. But merely to have the chance to leaf such niggles is momentous in itself, as the light blazes forth amid smacking of gobs far and wide, and the doubters are cast into darkness; and at the words "though I do not know the way" all the throats in the world are smitten fast with lumps the size of oranges, and for one irreplicable moment in cinema history it really looks as if fantasy film has acquired the power of flight.

Movies are an impatient art, closer in temper to the average *LoTR* reader than to its author, and Peter Jackson's fellowship have understood the central importance of this for their own quest. Paced like a good first reading, *The*

Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring boldly fillets the leisurely Book I of its four central chapters of aimless divagation; skips all but the most fleeting references to the immensities of backstory, with orphaned references to the line of Númenor and elves passing into the west that mean nothing without immersion in the books of lore; and makes the most of the fact that cinema is a lot more encouraging of intercut multiple plot-lines than Tolkien ever felt comfortable with – something from which the structure of both *Towers* and *Return* is bound to benefit still further.

Seeing the whole edifice dismantled and rebuilt like this, you appreciate for the first time how peculiar are aspects of JRRT's narrative technique – in particular, the preference for following one strand of a laboriously computed master chronology and embedding everything else, no matter how much more dramatic, in flashbacks. Apart from the bridge of Khazad-Dûm, remarkably little of any moment happens on the pages of *Fellowship* itself, which are instead taken up almost

entirely with (a) exposition and (b) trudging; and Jackson's sensible solution is to enact as much as possible of (a) and redistribute what's left over, while burying all he can of (b) in establishing longshots or simply in cuts. Indeed, one of the privileges for those viewers permanently clad in underarmor is to spot the famous lines of dialogue reassigned, which often gain an additional piquancy from their new context.

It's all a fascinating study in intelligent disassembly by people whose sense of both material and medium triumphs over their dogged inability to write speakable Tolkienesque dialogue. Aware that its sesqui-Salkind threefer shoot and release is recapitulating the trilogic gaps of first publication, Jackson's film artfully takes full advantage of its disembedding of single-stranded telling into multilinear showing, with teaser glimpses not just of future attractions like the Cracks of Doom and Minas Tirith, but of the unglimped Barad-Dûr itself. The lack of a proper pitched battle in the original *Fellowship* is neatly addressed by



Viggo Mortensen
as Aragorn



Liv Tyler
as Arwen



Sean Bean
as Boromir



Cate Blanchett
as Galadriel



Orlando Bloom
as Legolas



Christopher Lee
as Saruman

an impressive opening flashback to the Last Alliance; and it's only surprising that Frodo's stunning climactic vision on Amon Hen is so regrettably truncated in the film, as it hastens towards its more conventional closure.

It's unashamedly a narrative-driven reading, informed by the values of digital epic cinema, and there are tests ahead more severe than Bombadil that will determine whether filmic or novelistic priorities are to win out. (Will the scouring of the Shire make it? Will the Havens?) A tricky case in point is the most obvious beneficiary of the unflashbacking, Saruman – whose first direct appearance in JRR's own text doesn't come until after the fall of Isengard, and even then only in long-shot. As with other elements, his reinstatement to real-time chronology isn't without its problems, particularly in the attempt to present his dealings with Sauron and the lurid details of his dysgenics programme. Jackson has fleshed out Treebeard's hint about the dayproof Uruk-Hai being a Sarumanic crossbreed – the orc/man hybrid nonsensically altered to a crossbreed of "orcs and goblins," presumably because the original skirts a little too close to the perceived racial dickiness of Tolkien's world – but his telescoped chronology allows no time for the kind of inter-species beastliness JRR seems to have had in mind, so that Saruman now has to delve cyclopean breeding-vats under Orthanc and engender his army by accelerated creature FX. There are some remarkable images here (as well as some rather schlocky ones); but the very attempt to do *LotR* in the language of film has meant some fundamental changes to tone and meaning.



Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring – left Elijah Wood as Frodo, top right Dominic Monaghan as Merry, bottom right Sean Astin as Sam, and bottom left Ian McKellen as Gandalf



Such tensions abound, as they must. On the one hand, this movie *Fellowship* is self-consciously authentic enough to include a map at the front; and you can't but admire the pluck of a Ring-bearer who dares to include one of Bilbo's songs, not once but twice, and both as bare of tune as in anyone's darkest imaginings. Yet on the other, a quite scarifying amount of work has gone into trying to make Aragorn a more 21st-century kind of hero, racked with self-doubt, fear of failure, and severe ancestor anxiety. It's a brave attempt, which may yet bear fruit in the later instalments, but it's got to be said that this is the kind of thing Jackson and co-writers do least well. In plot terms as well as gender balance, the substitution of Arwen for Glorfindel *passim* is an elegant and, with hindsight, obvious solution to the challenge of Appendix A.I(v), but Jackson and co-writers are unable to come up with any convincing love-talk for her and Aragorn in the light of what's supposed to have been 67 years and counting of tortured forbidden romance. (And just what is that bit of elven tat she hands him?)

Indeed, with the exception of Elijah Wood's spookily spot-on (if very doleful) Frodo, most of the casting is nice-try-but, and has to win you over by game persistence. Not all do, and fewer still can deliver Tolkien's own lines with assurance – though Sir Ian makes it sound easy, bless his pointy hat, and the equally miscast-but-engaging Cate Blanchett makes a surprisingly effective runner-up, despite some regrettable digital enhancement to the "All will love me and despair" showstopper. There are, inevitably, some lines that make you want to cast yourself with a thin wail into the abyss: "So be it: you shall the The Fel-

lowship of the Ring!", "Nobody tosses a dwarf!", and the last-minute prizes-natcher for imparting angular momentum to JRR's mortal remains, "Let's hunt some Orc!" On the plus side, though, they've discovered that you can get a long way just by rolling the Rs in proper names like circus snares (Gondohrrr, Balhrroog, Mohrrrdohrrr) and, in moments where still coarser thespianship is needed, to throw on a Welsh accent strong enough to strip weatherseal. In fact, of the many interesting surprises in *Fellowship*, surely the least anticipated has been the quite rampant extremes of Welshness on display from elves and dwarves alike – though the corresponding revelation that the Tookers are from East Kilbride is one that heads are still working on getting around.

The best casting of all, of course, is New Zealand as Middle-earth, for all the inevitable visual reminiscences of *Xena* and her TV siblings. Fortunately, the secret of not looking like bad Tolkien art (which if we're honest includes all Tolkien art, not exempting JRR's own) turns out to be fairly simple: just make everything damper and dirtier than fan illustration has ever permitted. This is something that comes easily enough against the backdrop of beautiful South Island, where the best has been made of the west coast's annual dry day, but the landscape still squelches fetchingly under the eye. On the whole, Jackson's designers are much stronger at the dark than the light. The most thrilling digital sets, and visually the stars of the whole spectacle, are the places of shadow: Moria, Barad-Dûr, Orthanc and its busy sub-basements. By contrast, the elven kitsch of Rivendell looks a bit too much like a holistic rehab in Oregon; Caras Galadon is an

unrecognizably darker, soggier place than its impact on the characters requires; and the fleeting preview of Minas Tirith suggests the white tower needs to do something about its particulate emissions. But for the most part the digital design and execution is an astonishing achievement for what's essentially a single backwoods FX shop. The problem of hobbit stature hasn't been entirely cracked; there's a tendency for the species to squash up in medium shot and thin out in closeup. But Hollywood has invested a century of development in a complete visual language designed to make short, stumpy actors look like normal-height people, and to reverse this was never going to be the work of a moment.

The most chilling bit of *Fellowship* is a detail that only a tiny minority of viewers will even have witnessed, having fled the auditorium with a wail at the first sounds of the Enya crowd-dispersal device. Nothing in the film itself has the impact of the very final credit, which reveals in deceptively small letters just how much of this property, and thereby of the proceeds, still belongs to the dark lord of Fantasy Records who broke John Fogerty in the elder days and has spent the intervening aeons (and Creeden's money) gathering power to himself. For all the frightfully worthy film properties Saul Zaentz has gathered to his hoard over the decades, he's still the man who bought the discarded rights to *LotR* for a pittance after the collapse of the live-action Boorman version; overrode Tolkien's own express wishes that no animated version be made, and unleashed the hideous Ralph Bakshi upon it, with results that the passing of an age of the world has not made one whit less shuddersome; and still owns the title and characters in perpetuity and beyond, till his incorporate body be unmade in the fires of Doom. Just to get his version out of the door of Bag End, Jackson has had to do a dark Sarumanian deal with one of the less lovable figures in the business; and while there's no denying Jackson's own wizardry, or the irresistibility of his voice, we shouldn't forget the power he serves in the land where the shadows lie. Yet so far-fetched is the conjunction of improbabilities that have made this *Fellowship* work – such an unlikely concentration of preposterous talent in outlandish places with unprecedented amounts of Hollywood money – that one can only conclude that Jackson was meant to film the Ring, and not by its master. And that may be an encouraging thought.

As recent titles have been loudly reminding us, a splatter vet of an elder generation has remained his own man for richer and poorer – and in the

case of *John Carpenter's Ghosts of Mars*, very much the latter. After the high-concept and agreeably whacked-out *Vampires*, *Ghosts of Mars* is a spectacular return to the dismal form last seen in *Escape from L.A.* Stitching together body parts from *Precinct 13*, *The Thing*, the Plissken escapades and *Prince of Darkness*, it sends Natasha Henstridge back to demon-haunted Mars (does that girl do anything else?) against an ancient evil awakened in the mines. Luckily for the extremely challenged budget, Mars has by 2176 been 84% terraformed, which means it looks exactly like the New Mexico desert shot at night with red filters, and all that remains is for the cast of C-listers (Ice Cube, Pam Grier, Clea Duvall, Joanna Cassidy, with the voice of Charlotte Cornwell in the strangest last role since Lugosi's) to break out of a possessed mining village whose entire citizenry has been turned into a psychotic goth cult by ancient Martian warrior ghosts bent on decapitating all 640,000 human colonists on the planet and wearing their skin for masks.

No film on a premise this stupid can be entirely worthless, though *JC's* does its spirited best. The narrative structure breaks all the laws of filmic narrative that *Fellowship of the Ring* so thoughtfully imposes – arranging its plot in an orgy of flashbacks embedded anything up to three deep, for no better reason than to try and glue a mass of discontinuous scenes together in some desperate semblance of continuity. A one-set courtroom frame seems to have been added as a late resort to replace SCENE MISSING cards with a first-person voiceover, creating dizzying disruptions to internal continuity and chronology. (Q: "Where was your commanding officer during this time?" Henstridge: "I can only report what Sergeant Jericho told me later." Woman behind me to companion: "I'm baffled now. What's going on?") There are hacked-about remnants of what was clearly once a plot, with using cop Henstridge discovering that her stash apparently repels the Martian spooks, but failing to do anything with the remaining hits, and nobody shows any curiosity about how she shrugged the horrors off. And the characterization is quite majestically awful; in what looks frighteningly like a nod to Ian McDonald, Ice Cube's character (doing the Vin Diesel role out of *Pitch Black*) is named James "Desolation" Williams, and we're supposed to believe cops would address him by his middle name, unabbreviated. Dialogue includes such gems as "Before he cut his throat he yelled something like 'Stay away! Don't open the door!'" "Everyone in this place lost their minds, went round chopping people's heads off," and (to uproar from audience) "These are my

compadres: Uno, Dos, and Tres." There are certainly moments evocative of something much finer: the *Final Fantasy*-style flashboxed engrams of ancient Martian civilization; the dust-borne ghosts hugging the desert rails ("When their host dies, they just drift along the railroad tracks from town to town"). But someone or something seems to have chopped off the head in which all this might once have made sense, and now it just lumbers around to loud guitar music clouting people with its gun. Such, apparently, is John Carpenter's world.

The vengeful ghosts of history's victims on this planet are the subject of Guillermo del Toro's *The Devil's Backbone*, which reflects its author's there-and-back-again journey between his small, fertile native backwater and the perilous realm of Hollywood. Back home in Mexico, he made *Cronos*; in Hollywood, the underappreciated *Mimic* and now the imminent *Blade 2*; but here he is in Spain, retracing the steps of that nation's greatest cineaste from the new world back to the old, with a civil-war ghost story for the Almodovars' outfit El Deseo. I'm not really sure there's as much to *The Devil's Backbone* as meets the eye, but its fusion of Latin melodrama, historical parable, and classy supernatural thriller is a happy holiday from Hollywood while it lasts. A film that manages to fit desert, slugs, and artificial limbs into its opening minutes is clearly unshy of the label Bunuellesque, and there's plenty of that in this child-centred tale of a desert orphanage simultaneously terrorized by a harboured fascist and the ghost of his previous victim.

How much it all signifies is less clear. "Sometimes I think we're the ghosts," portentously opines the orphanage's anti-fascist management, riven with more political contradictions and forbidden desires than you'd think possible for a cast of two. Clearly in some sense the orphanage in the desert is meant for an allegory of the nation, and the tale of its ghost's revenge has ambitions to say something about the grip of history on the generations of and after fascism; but the final act's descent into luridly murderous revenge plotting is at once a little too Hollywood and a little too Latin to allow any sharper political meaning to crystallize. Nevertheless, the performances from both adults and boys are uniformly wonderful, the blazing Guadalajara light is beautifully shot, and the fantasy effects are designed and executed with the flair of one who, like Jackson, has passed through Hollywood's shadow and out the other side into a far and beautiful place of vision.

Nick Lowe

ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

Although Arab scholars are unimpressed by the suggested terrorist influence of Isaac Asimov's "Foundation" series (translated into Arabic as *Al-Qaeda*), Malcolm Edwards of Orion Books found mystic confirmation in the science of anagrammancy: "I note, conclusively, that 'Osama Bin Laden' is an anagram of 'I a Seldon BA, man' – proof of his deep study of the Holy Text."

NEGATIVE MINUS

Roy Boulting (1913-2001), one of the UK film-making Boulting Brothers, died early in November aged 87. The brothers ventured into sf territory with their nuclear thriller *Seven Days to Noon* (1950).

Arthur C. Clarke is telling correspondents about his accidental sf prediction of 1973, at the start of *Rendezvous with Rama*. Although the year is 2077, the place Italy and the method a natural meteor impact, his huge disaster (complete with "dazzling fireball") does indeed happen on 11 September.

Dorothy Dunnnett (1923-2001), Scottish author whose historical novels (the Lymond series especially) were highly regarded in sf fan circles, died on 9 November; she was 78.

Christopher Priest was presented with the Prix Utopia 2001 – the French sf lifetime achievement or grandmaster award – at the Utopiales 2001, the international festival in Nantes at the start of November. Previously honoured authors are Jack Vance, Brian Aldiss, and Frederik Pohl.

Terry Pratchett attended Josh Kirby's funeral, an informal Humanist affair: "It may be the only such occasion so far to include Monty Python's 'The Galaxy Song,' which seemed well received all round..."

Andy Sawyer of the SF Foundation was in Nantes too: "By the time Chris was called on stage to pick up the Prix Utopia, it had been under the spotlight for so long that it was hot enough to raise blisters as it was handed to him, thus giving him the honour of becoming the first major sf writer to inadvertently dismantle his award before he got off stage." Awed cheers were heard from the Brits "as Chris outdid us all by delivering his victory speech in French."

Kurt Vonnegut's story "Harrison Bergeron" was cited by the US Supreme Court in 2001. A decision that disabled players must be allowed to use golf carts in pro tournaments was dissented from by Justice Scalia, who compared this terrible thing to Vonnegut's dystopia where "everybody was finally equal" thanks to massive handicaps imposed on the healthy and able-bodied.

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Spooksafe. It's good to know that British insurance firm Ultraviolet sells this cover against alien abduction, poltergeist attack, and becoming a werewolf or vampire. Most Spooksafe sales, for some reason, are to California. But it isn't easy money: a UK newspaper reports that they "paid out £100,000 to a woman whose claim that evil spirits threw her over the banisters was apparently verified by experts." No doubt very special premiums would be quoted to Whitley Strieber.

Critical Masterclass. Sometimes Thog worries whether submissions may be just too clever for him... "What we have in the sentence of which this lexia is a part is a dispersal over the foreground topography (i.e., in the subject), by metonymic reduction, of the New Sentimentality, which, three lexias hence (57) will reappear to disperse itself in the outward discourse with a direct statement."... "This arrangement is at least as inadequate as the Saussurian concept of S/s before the Lacanian modification." (Samuel R. Delany, *The American Shore*, 1978) [LP] Academic Andrew M. Butler tells Thog that all this makes perfect sense.

Terrorwatch. Ben Jeapes of publishers Big Engine heard from Amazon.co.uk: "We have recently become aware that some book shipments contain a white powdery substance used to protect titles from humidity. In light of recent events and in the interests of safety, we would like you to please refrain from including any such powder in your shipments to us."

Bar Trek. UK TV listing: "The crew of the *Enterprise* fall victim to a mysterious contaminant that causes them to behave in an inebriated manner." I had some of that at a convention once.

As Others See Us. The British media are still evolving strategies to deal with the vast popularity of Terry Pratchett without seeming too uncool. The *Independent* on Sunday recently ran an appreciative review of TP's *The Truth* which ended: "a funny and curiously tender satire on the origins of journalism." But the opening went: "A good stiff drink should see you through this one. Failing that, give it to a Pratchett fan." Perhaps a disapproving subeditor added that bit? Meanwhile, from an overheard conversation between onlookers during Terry's latest signing tour: "Oh, you know, he's quite famous – he's the guy who wrote *The Hobbit*."

In Typo Veritas. "...the sea boiled, great birds spat fire from the sky, and metal breasts rose up from the waves and destroyed the harbours." (Samuel R. Delany, *The Jewels of Apor*, Gollancz 2001 reissue)

Big Numbers. I got quite excited about a Fictionwise.com royalty statement saying they'd shifted 3,931 "units" of my story "Different Kinds of Darkness," downloadable for a trifling sum. Closer inspection indicated approximately 31 actual sales and 3,900 downloads from when they offered the 2001 Hugo short-fiction nominees as freebies. Oh well.

Respect at Last. The *Oxford English Dictionary* wants sf readers to help with citations of sf/fan terms whose earliest printed appearance is uncertain. See http://66.108.177.107/SF/sf_citations.shtml...

Fan R.I.P. Terry Hughes (1950-2001), US sf fan, publisher of the very fine 1970s fanzine *Mota*, and a personal friend, died on 14 November.

Thog's Masterclass. "The first smart rock overloaded the Phinon's shields and it collapsed to nothing but a smile of satisfaction on Rick's face." (Jeffery D. Kooistra, *Dykstra's War*, 2000) "This wasn't like him. But he had just vanquished an alien race single-handedly. It was natural he'd be different after that." "I'm going to remove the skull so I can watch what happens in the brain when I make you my mate," he said. "No one has ever determined if there is any actual physical response in the brain." (both Rodman Philbrick & Lynn Harnett, *Abduction*, 1998)

Late Thog Submission! Arthur C. Clarke writes: "Herewith my modest contribution to Thog's Masterclass. *You cad!* she hissed. Try it sometime!" Thank you, Sir Arthur, but where's the attribution and date on which Thog insists? Is this from 2001?

As creatures with ten digits, we attach special importance to powers of ten in counting the years, so the arrival of a new decade, century, or millennium always provokes a hullabaloo. When commemorating other events, however, tenth anniversaries are too common to bother about, while one thousandth anniversaries may involve circumstances too distant in time to arouse concern. One hundredth anniversaries better command our attention.

The 20th century, unfortunately, gave the science fiction community few causes for centennial observances, with some exceptions. If the western world in 1918 had enjoyed a proper understanding of science fiction, and had not been distracted by the Great War, they might have staged a joyful good celebration for the one hundredth anniversary of the first publication of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Centennials of the births of Jules Verne (1928), H. Rider Haggard (1956), and Hugo Gernsback (1984) might have been recognized, along with milestones like the one hundredth anniversary of the first use of the term "science fiction" (1951). Only recently have commemorations along these lines actually occurred: utopian scholars feted the one hundredth anniversary of the first publication of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* in 1988, and science fiction conferences were held in honour of the one hundredth anniversaries of the first publications of H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1995) and *The War of the Worlds* (1998).

Yet the 21st century, in contrast to the 20th, will offer innumerable opportunities for centennial observances of important science fiction authors, texts, and events of the 20th century, the era when the genre developed its distinctive identity, greatly expanded in size and visibility, and emerged as a dominant cultural force. Virtually every year will offer some pretext for celebration: 2012 – a century of Tarzan! 2026 – a century of science fiction magazines! 2038 – a century of Superman! 2056 – a century of J.G. Ballard! 2066 – a century of *Star Trek*! 2082 – a century of *Interzone*! And which celebrations actually take place, and the extent and fervour of those celebrations, will provide early clues about whether certain icons will endure through the ages. For those wondering how Robert A. Heinlein will hold up in Northrop Frye's literary stock market, for example, observing what happens in 2007, the one hundredth anniversary of his birth, should prove revelatory.

Truly, if the 20th century was The Century of Science Fiction, the 21st century will be The Century of Science Fiction Centennials.

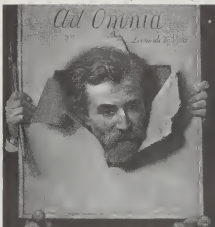
Celebrating a CENTURY of SCIENCE FICTION • FILMS • — with — A Trip to the Moon Gary Westfahl

Among other effects, this will make life easier for those who write about science fiction on a regular basis. When a deadline approaches and no promising subjects are available, the desperate columnist can simply consult a reference book, find out what happened a hundred years ago, and launch into a retrospective discussion. One could generate a century of science fiction columns in this fashion.

And, as you've guessed by now, I'm about to start the ball rolling.

Though I neglected this strategy in 2001, only two missed opportunities come to mind, the one hundredth anniversaries of the first publications of M.P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* and H.G. Wells's *The First Men in the Moon*. For 2002, only one topic merits discussion, the one hundredth anniversary of the first science fiction film, Georges Méliès's *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (*A Trip to the Moon*).

On the basis of this film, can we inarguably commemorate "A century of science fiction film"? Objections might



Self-portrait c. 1880 by George Méliès. The superscription purportedly translates colloquially as "Top this, Leonardo da Vinci!"

be raised. Phil Hardy's *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction Films* cites some relevant films that preceded *Le Voyage dans la Lune*, though these are brief and inconsequential – like depictions of machines that transform live animals into sausages. After Méliès, critics seeking a first science fiction film with greater length and substance might look longingly at *Metropolis* (1926) or *Things to Come* (1936). And the film that established science fiction as a recognized film genre was undoubtedly *Destination Moon* (1950), which along with its sleazier sister film *Rocketship X-M* (1950) might provide excellent material for the columnist writing in *Interzone* no. 755 (May 2050).

Despite these quibbles, if science fiction film requires a father figure, Méliès is, for all his shortcomings, the most obvious candidate. In some respects, he invites comparison to another father figure that many wish to forget, Hugo Gernsback: both came from continental Europe, both were fascinated with gadgetry, both appeared to lack vision in their artistry, and both were eventually obliged to retreat from the arena of their greatest success. Yet there are two key differences between them. First, unlike Gernsback, Méliès was no businessman, and while Gernsback kept profiting from other publications after abandoning science fiction, the collapse of Méliès's film-making career drove him into menial jobs and humiliating obscurity. Second, and more tellingly, Gernsback fully recognized what science fiction was and why it was important, while such insights eluded Méliès. It's hard to blame him for this, because in the early 1900s such insights eluded virtually the entire world, including Wells himself, who soon gave up science fiction to fritter away his energies on forgotten projects outside the genre. Still, in any evaluation of Méliès, his failure to understand the special value of science fiction qualifies as a darn shame.

Despite what certain websites suggest, one should not attach too much importance to the biographies of famous film-makers in assessing their works, and it is emphasized too often that Méliès was originally a stage magician and thus, like a magician, intent solely upon presenting series of impressive tricks. Yet despite its episodic qualities, *Le Voyage dans la Lune* does project some talent for sustained narrative, and it can be regarded as a shrewd combination of Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865) and Wells's *The First Men in the Moon*. (Inarguably, then, 2002 at least provides reason to celebrate "A century of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells on film.") Méliès recognized what was most interesting in

these novels and took the best of each in constructing his film.

Verne, one might say, was most fascinated by Process – how something gets done, how someone gets from one place to another – and *From the Earth to the Moon* offers an involving account of how scientists in the 19th century might have achieved space flight. Upon reaching the goal of this effort, however, Verne falls flat; unable to devise a plausible way for his voyagers to reach the lunar surface, his sequel merely sends them *Round the Moon* (1870) to observe from a distance. Wells, in contrast, was more interested in Product – what has gotten done, what one sees upon arriving at a different place – and *The First Men in the Moon* magically summons up some gravity-defying Cavorite to get explorers to the Moon as quickly as possible, so most of the novel can be devoted to portraying a singular alien civilization. Some argue that Verne's attentiveness to Process makes him the progenitor of hard science fiction, dedicated to scientifically defensible descriptions of what might be done, whereas Wells's attentiveness to Product makes him the progenitor of soft science fiction, concerned more with employing what has been done to achieve literary ends.

Le Voyage dans la Lune serves well as the first science fiction film because it focuses on both Process and Product. It borrows from Verne the Process of getting to the Moon, and in the context of an era when films were farcical vignettes, Méliès is reasonably accurate in adapting *From the Earth to the Moon*. Astronomers first discuss the proposed moon launch, complete with a diagram on a blackboard, anticipating many similar scenes in later films about space travel. We observe the projectile for the voyage being constructed by blacksmiths and carpenters, then being moved by comely women into a giant cannon for launching. Borrowed from Wells's *The First Men in the Moon*, less faithfully, is the Product of these labours – the landing on the Moon, the discovery of underground aliens resembling apes or birds, and the explorers' successful escape from the aliens and return to Earth. Méliès's film thus foreshadows other films based on Verne and Wells novels: Verne adaptations would be respectful, if sometimes slow-moving, enlivened by female characters added to Verne's all-male casts – like *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1956), *From the Earth to the Moon* (1958), and *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1959). Wells adaptations would wildly depart from the texts to metamorphose into monster movies – like *The Island of Lost Souls* (1933), *The War of the Worlds* (1953), and *The Time Machine* (1960).

What distinguishes *Le Voyage dans*

la Lune from Méliès's other fantastic films – like *Les Quatre Cents Farces du Diable* (*The Merry Frolics of Satan*) (1906) and *A la Conquête du Pôle* (*The Conquest of the Pole*) (1912) – is that it derives a genuine sense of conviction from its sources. We may laugh at the film's touches of humour and fantasy – the astronomers garbed in the star-studded robes of stereotypical astrologers, the projectile attended by bathing beauties and famously poking the eye of the Man in the Moon, the explorers walking on the Moon without spacesuits – but there remains something realistic about its Vernian spacecraft, something credible about its Welshian aliens, which accounts for the film's remarkable longevity. A key moment comes when the exhausted explorers settle down for a nap after landing on the Moon. We observe an obvious dream sequence: above the astronomers' heads materialize the stars of the Big Dipper with women's faces, a goddess perched on the crescent Moon, an old man representing Saturn, and two girls holding a star. These images perfectly reflect the aura of precious, sentimental fantasy found in other silent films about space travel. But *this* voyage to the Moon is not a dream: the explorers wake up, enter a cavern, marvel at some giant mushrooms (borrowed from *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*?), and are attacked by hostile aliens – things that might really happen to humans visiting another world.

Although *Le Voyage dans la Lune* thus decisively steps away from fantasy to follow the path of science fiction, Méliès clearly didn't comprehend his own breakthrough. In 1904, striving to match the success of *Le Voyage dans la Lune*, he employed logic worthy of a contemporary Hollywood executive – I've taken men to the Moon, so why not take them to the Sun? As even that brief synopsis suggests, *Voyage à Travers l'Impossible* (*An Impossible Voyage*) (1904) is unrelieved silliness, with a train flying into the Sun's mouth as part of an improvisational plot utterly lacking the relative coherence and purposefulness of *Le Voyage dans la Lune*. (In 2004, should we cele-

brate "A century of bad science fiction film sequels"?") Since the special effects in the two films are equally impressive, they illustrate another important principle long understood by science fiction fans, if not by Hollywood executives: the success of science fiction films depends not on the quality of their special effects, but on the thoughtfulness and integrity of their stories. That is why most great science fiction films, like *Le Voyage dans la Lune*, are based (however tenuously) on science fiction stories and novels, such as *Things to Come*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), 2001: *A Space Odyssey* (1968), *The Andromeda Strain* (1971), and *Blade Runner* (1982).

What Méliès should have done, then, was to closely base his subsequent films on other science fiction novels of his day – like *The War of the Worlds*, Verne's *Off on a Comet*, or even *Looking Backward* – further developing the embryonic flair for credibly fantastic narrative displayed in *Le Voyage dans la Lune* with scenarios that would also offer opportunities for spectacular illusions. What Méliès actually did was to keep making it up as he went along in countless incohesive films until the maturation of film-makers around him drove his old-fashioned tableaux out of the theatres.

Still, if Méliès never fully achieved the sort of science fiction film we now admire, his influence can be felt in our era's equivalents of silent films, music videos. Peter Gabriel's "Sledgehammer" (1986), Michael Jackson's "Leave Me Alone" (1989), and Madonna's "Bedtime Story" (1995) are modern short films without dialogue featuring people travelling through strange worlds created with state-of-the-art special effects – precisely what Méliès specialized in and would have greatly appreciated had he survived to see them.

But one video in particular brings this story full circle, the Smashing Pumpkins' "Tonight, Tonight" (1995), an affectionate tribute to Méliès that meticulously recreates the plot and mood of *Le Voyage dans la Lune*: amidst footage of band members performing the song as ethereal beings, a man and woman travel to the Moon, confront and disintegrate its strange inhabitants, return to Earth to observe undersea wonders, and are rescued by a ship fittingly named the *S.S. Méliès*. The tremendous popularity of this video, MTV's 1996 Video of the Year, indicates just how permanently the images of Méliès's film have been etched upon popular culture, proving that the one hundredth anniversary of *Le Voyage dans la Lune* is indeed worth celebrating.

Gary Westfahl



The Eclipse/Eclipse du soleil en pleine lune (1907) by George Méliès

New World

Mary Soon Lee

It's a new world, a better world than Susan ever imagined when she was growing up. What is it that young president kept saying during the last election campaign? *No one needs to be unhappy any more.* And no one is, certainly not Susan, certainly not this morning. She lies snug in the bed, Ivan's arm warm against her back as she waits for him to wake up on this, their 200th wedding anniversary.

Sunlight filters through the blinds of their cabana on the Outer Banks, North Carolina, a place of sun, blowing sand, shells, fish, pelicans, gulls, sandpipers, herons, ducks, orange-beaked oystercatchers, turtles, and crabs. It's a windy morning, and the wooden cabana sways on its stilts, rocking her where she lies in the bed, just as it did when they came here on their honeymoon.

Ivan ran down to the beach before breakfast that first morning: barefoot, lanky, eager as a schoolkid. And Susan followed a minute later, clutching towels and a bottle of cranberry juice, and saw something hurry away from her across the sand, a tiny pale-brown crab, scuttling sideways, two black eyes on short stalks looking at her for a moment before it had darted into a hole.

At first she and Ivan planned on a big 200th anniversary celebration, a reunion for all the many friends and relatives they've accumulated over the years. But Ivan didn't want to drag the youngsters away from their busy lives to spend the day gawping at two old-timers.

And when Susan thought of how difficult a party would be, trying to entertain unenhanced biological guests and cyborgs, virtual visitors and AIs, she knew she wouldn't be able to relax. If she could have talked to Marisa again, really talked, that would have made it worthwhile. But Marisa, their foster-child – who for decades had struggled with the simplest problems, a genetic-engineering miscalculation leaving her out of step with this modern world and its smart, thoughtful, beautiful citizens – Marisa had recently undergone cybernetic augmentation. Oh, she would come if they asked her, but she would have to slow down her thoughts ten-fold just to hold a conversation with Susan and Ivan. And that was good, Susan told herself firmly, good that Marisa had found a

new way, a better way.

But still, though it was selfish, Susan missed the days when Marisa used to run up to her, arms open wide, wanting nothing more complicated than to be hugged.

In the bed beside her, Ivan stirs, his hand stroking her side. "I love you," he tells her, as he has told her every morning they've woken up beside each other.

They are the most boring couple Susan has ever heard of, never dabbling in multiple marriages or gender-swapping; never trying any of the hallucinogens or mood-swingers; never travelling off-planet; never cloned; neither of them electronically augmented or connected to the Nets. Once a year they go to the medlab for regeneration and then on to the memory bank for personality-download, but otherwise they live a practically 18th-century existence.

Susan, who has never regretted one hour of their ordinary, humdrum marriage, rolls over to kiss Ivan. Despite the marvels of regeneration, her joints are stiffer than they used to be, and she and Ivan move together slowly, carefully, rocking the bed as it rocks in the wind.

Sitting under their parasol on the beach late that afternoon, Susan is slipping straight from one perfect moment to the next. The air is overflowing with light, sparkles dancing on the waves where a fat-bellied pelican bobs up and down.

A few yards from the parasol, Ivan is building a lopsided sand castle with a plastic spade. Along the whole wide stretch of the beach, no one else is in sight.

When Ivan reaches the final decorative stage, adding seashells and strands of green seaweed, she gets up to help him. The sand is hot between her fingers as she picks up shells, small ones for the top of the castle, larger ones for the bottom.

A shadow falls over her. Susan looks up, and Marisa is standing there in a short white dress that whips against her legs in the breeze. She hadn't heard anyone approach, had thought the beach deserted except for the birds. "Marisa? I – how – it's so good to see you –"

"It was Daddy's idea to surprise you," said Marisa,

"But you didn't think I'd let this day go by without seeing you."

Ivan stands up, pulling Susan with him, and puts one arm around her, one arm around Marisa. He squeezes Susan. "I know we agreed it would only be the two of us, but Marisa wanted to come, and I know you've been missing her."

Susan can't speak. She stares at Marisa, seeing the faint shadow of the implants under her temples, knowing the sacrifice her foster-daughter must be making to talk at the glacial pace of the unaugmented, a sacrifice offered this day as an anniversary gift – the best gift Susan could have received.

And there they are an hour later, the three of them together at *The Seafarer's Grill*. Solograms create the illusion that they are alone, sitting at a linen-covered table on the patio as the sun leaches out of the sky. The sound of the other customers' conversations is electronically damped to silence, and the dishes appear as if magically, only a white glove showing momentarily where the waiter flicks away a bread-crumbs.

The taste of the food mingles with the salt still left on her lips, the new potatoes dripping in butter, the grilled salmon succulent in a red pepper sauce.

Marisa tells them about her new job, refining the responses of simulated characters in VR dramas, and about her social life. She's dating, something she'd never done before her augmentation, and she's been skipping from one partner to another, trying biologicals and mechanicals, women, men, multiple groups. But nothing serious, she says, not yet, she's got plenty of time, centuries to find the right someone or several someones.

Susan tells her how she and Ivan let a friend talk them into a fishing trip. "A disaster," Ivan says ruefully. Hard to believe they'd never been fishing before, and, since they didn't catch a single fish between them, they have no plans to repeat the experience.

The last spoonful of crème caramel slips down Susan's throat. A star winks low over the sea. It's over, the meal is over, and Marisa is saying goodbye. Susan hugs her daughter tight, trying to hold onto something that's already gone.

Where did the time go? This day, the past 200 years, so

fast, a string of isolated moments: Ivan beside her in the bed this morning, the first cold plunge into the sea, Marisa appearing by the sand castle, a spoonful of dessert, each memory like a jewel on a necklace, crystalline and perfect, but the fabric between them lost.

Susan takes a deep, deep breath of the night-sea air, and the twinge of melancholy is past. Hand in hand with Ivan, she walks along the shoreline. Sand creeps between the toes of her sandals. The waves break in muted thunder, then run away, water fizzing through the sand as it goes.

Ivan clicks on a flashlight. In the path of its beam, ghost-crabs leap into existence, squatting near their holes, alert and curious, their shells the size of Susan's palm.

When the two of them first came here on their honeymoon, tourists crowded the Outer Banks, the main road along the islands packed bumper-to-bumper with cars every weekend. But the islands have quieted down over the decades, other tourists preferring to canoe through rain forests, or to ski in Antarctica, or to stay at home with a simulation of the resorts on Saturn's moons that overlook the twisted braids of the great rings. Perhaps she and Ivan are the only couple out on the beach tonight.

His hand is dry and warm and familiar in hers, and she has everything she wants, everything she has ever wanted.

"Simulation ends. Hypnosis ends."

Susan blinks in the sudden dark, and in one jarring wrench she knows just where she is, cradled in a VR-carapace, Ivan dead, killed two months before their 200th wedding anniversary.

But no one needs to be unhappy any more, at least not for very long. Susan whispers to Ivan's ghost, out there in the darkness she cannot bring herself to face, tells him she will always love him, and afterwards she raises her voice: "Computer. Begin hypnosis. Replay simulation."

Mary Soon Lee, who was raised in England but lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, has now published well over 50 short stories, in magazines such as *Amazing*, *F&SF*, *Realms of Fantasy* and *Spectrum SF*, as well as half a dozen times in *Interzone*. A collection, *Winter Shadows and Other Tales*, was published in the USA by Dark Regions Press, in November 2001.



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There was no sea, and on the esplanade behind me Scab danced for rain. I gripped the guard rail and stared at desolation. Twenty feet below was the beach side promenade, its concrete slabs already half-masked by sand. Beyond the promenade was the pebble beach, falling quite steeply to the high-tide line which was marked by a straggle of flotsam – Coke cans, driftwood, cuttle-shells, plastic bottles. Beyond this, the pebbles continued, ending where the silt plain began, half a mile away from where I stood. The plain stretched beyond the horizon.

Behind me, Scab chanted nonsensical spells, his limbs jerking like a puppet's. So far, his gyrations were having no visible effect: the sun shone in a sky of perfect blue, empty of clouds. I wondered how much longer the sky would be that colour, with so much dust being thrown up into the air each time a strong wind blew. Certainly, the sunsets were becoming more spectacular each night, washes of reds, turquoises and greens. A worrying sign. Still Scab danced, his frenetic movements kicking up dust.

My first morning breath was desert-dry. I groaned, and sat up in bed, my head pounding, my eyes heavily encrusted with sleep. The heavy red curtains were drawn, but light crept under them, and the city beyond was oddly quiet.

I got up and lurched over to the chest-of-drawers, fumbled for the clock and knocked over an already teetering pile of books in the process. The collapse sent the clock and half a dozen volumes thundering to the floor.

Cursing, I picked up the clock and went over to the window, half opening one of the curtains and wincing at the sunlight. The clock read a quarter to four, and wasn't ticking; I must have forgotten to wind it up.

I drew the curtains properly and opened a window. Silence. The concrete plaza in front of the little estate below, normally full of kids riding bikes, skateboarding, or screaming at each other, was empty. There weren't even any seagulls visible. A plastic bag, caught in some railings, ballooned in the wind.

I pulled on my bath robe and went to the kitchen to make a cup of tea, finding a mass of dirty crockery crammed in the dry sink. The electric kettle was empty, and when I turned on the cold tap, no water came out, even after I turned it on full, and waited.

Had the water company cut off the supply? We'd had wrangles over bill payments recently, and perhaps they'd finally taken action. Or perhaps they were making repairs and hadn't informed us; either way, I had to know. Going back to my bedroom, I rifled under the papers on my desk for the 'phone, trying to ignore the growing soreness at the back of my throat.

The line was dead. Disquieted, I went and knocked on my flatmate's door. Getting no reply, I peered in, and found the bed unmade and empty, as it had been the previous evening.

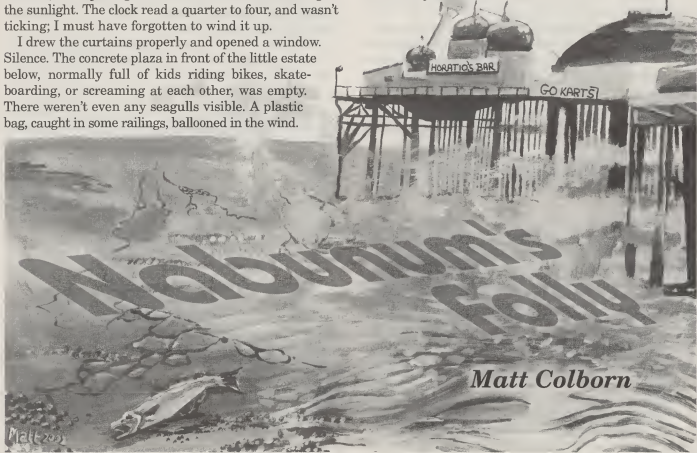
I started to cough, racking, dry explosions of air. Still retching, I stumbled into the bathroom to get some lavatory paper. Gradually, the coughs subsided and I slumped on the side of the bath, dizzy and weak, my chest aching.

I tried turning on all the taps in the bathroom. Again, nothing. Even the lavatory bowl was completely empty.

I dressed, feeling dirty, my deodorant only managing a fading sigh of air. I went and knocked on the front door of my neighbour's flat.

No reply. I went downstairs to get the post, but I found no letters waiting, not even junk mail.

Trying to ignore my increasing thirst, I knocked on all of the other doors in the building, but there was no reply from any of them. This was doubly strange. Two of the flats on the floor below me were owned by old women who rarely ventured out.



Matt Colborn

Deciding to go and get some bottled water, I opened the front door and stepped out into sunlight. The road, normally a riot of vehicles, was deserted. The supermarket was down the hill, on the corner of a major junction, and I began to walk towards it. On the way, I had to detour around a huddle of black rubbish bags which had spilled out of an entrance, across the path, but my foot caught on one of them as I did so, and something was dislodged.

The head rolled in a puff of dust for a short way down the pavement and bounced into the gutter. Yellow and black teeth grinned at me, the lips snarled from mummification. The eyes were sunken blackened pads.

The body, nothing more than a husk, still lay amongst the rubbish, huddled in a shapeless navy coat.

At the traffic lights by the supermarket on London Road stood a double-decker bus, the driver a leathery buddha behind the wheel. A solitary passenger lolled in a seat on the bottom deck, staring ceilingwards.

The supermarket was shuttered. I began to walk down the street in a daze, in the direction of the sea. All the seats at the hairdresser's were empty, and the reception desk at the adjacent travel agent was unattended.

I crossed the road, wandering towards St Peter's. The grass on the green was white and shrivelled; the young trees, in blossom only a couple of months previously, were reduced to dried skeletons. The church loomed, its spire a sharp, dar finger pointing to heaven.

Just south of the church green stood a stone needle about 20 feet high, perched on top of a box-shaped base. Shallow steps led up to stone drinking bowls which were positioned on opposite sides of the box. Above these bowls were green-grey copper spigots. I tried each in turn, but neither yielded a drop. Releasing the last tap in frustration, my gaze wandered across the stone above.

Like most other public structures, the fountain was covered in graffiti. Most of it was a spaghetti of multi-coloured lines, random visual noise, but the latest addition, scrawled over them all, was not.

Sprayed in crude, green paint about the basin, was the yawning mouth of a huge frog, with an awful glint in both eyes. There was also a message:

TIDDALIK SWALLOWS

A sudden swirl of dust filled my nose and mouth, making me splutter. I squinted, my eyes streaming. I must find water.

2 I swung the fire-axe at the supermarket's back door and it bit into ply and wood chip. Driven by the dryness in my mouth and fever in my brain, the swings were aggressive and rapid. The door buckled quickly.

It opened into a gloomy white corridor that led to the fire exit from the supermarket's office. One corpse sat in the office, hunched over a bank of dead monitors. It wore a blue jumper and a paperback lay splayed open on the table before it. I moved on, entering the supermarket itself.

I hurried past the cereals, preserves, desiccated bread, now over-crisp salads, shrivelled potatoes and tomatoes. I paused for a second at the fruit. A granny smith, tiny as a walnut, shattered between finger and thumb.

I reached the refrigerators and found nothing but

empty bottles, all stacked for sale. I touched a little bottle of Buxton sparkling, and it toppled, hitting the floor, bouncing, and rolling away. I picked it up, unscrewed the top, and poked my finger inside, desperately looking for a drop, a single drop, of water. Nothing. Throwing the bottle down, I feverishly opened each of the others in turn. Every one, whether still or sparkling, Buxton's, Sussex Downs or Perrier, was empty.

In the milk section, the cartons and bottles contained nothing but yellow-white powder. The alcohol was the same as the water. Whisky, wine, even the cans of beer, were all utterly devoid of liquid. I threw wine bottles on the floor. I raged, desperate with thirst. Precious tears flowed down my cheeks, and I would have licked them up if I'd thought of it.

Finally, feeling giddy, I slumped to the floor. How long could one go without water? Not very long. Two or three days at most.

But it is hard to despair. In 15 minutes, I was on my feet again, making as systematic a search as I could for drinkable liquid. The oils were still fluid, but of course undrinkable. So were the cleaning fluids.

Then I discovered the tins. I picked up a can of kidney beans in salt water and it felt full. I held it to my ear, shook it and heard the slosh of liquid inside. I ran through the store, clutching my prize. I'd seen a tin opener somewhere about, but I couldn't remember quite where. It took some frantic minutes to locate. Hands shaking, I tried to open the tin, cursing when I couldn't get purchase with the opener on the can's rim.

But when it opened, maroon, viscous liquid seeped out. I jabbed a hole in the other end, and eagerly sucked every drop of that disgusting liquid from the can. I dropped it, and went back to find more.

Half an hour later, I had a shopping trolley full of cans. It was peculiar; the only containers that had water in them were the cans of preserved pulses, beans, peas.

As I wheeled the trolley into the corridor I had entered by, I froze in alarm. Whilst I had been in the supermarket, someone had covered the inside of the corridor in wild sprays of colour and pattern. Red, black and green trails wove around and between each other, occasionally breaking into half-legible script. Black snakes wriggled in the chaos. There were only two words, written over and over. NABUNUM and TIDDALIK. The sprays of paint flowed, like a river, towards the mouth of another mighty frog, presented in profile this time. TIDDALIK was written in large pink and black letters below the depiction.

A sound at the door startled me. Too late, I thought of retreating back into the supermarket.

Scab loomed in the corridor, clad in a filthy raincoat, a shaggy grey beard bursting from his chin. He wielded a sawn-off shotgun.

"Don't take another step!" he snapped, "Or I'll add you to the murals!"

3 "When he comes," said Scab, "You'll be glad I'm with you."

We sat, a fire dying between us, on what used to be the beach. Scab had set up camp there to watch for Tid-

dalik. He had a hut which he'd constructed out of old crates, sailcloth and corrugated iron. We also had several large containers of water, tea-brown liquid collected from deep in the drains. Scab seemed to be good at finding water.

"Takes brains to outwit the bastard," he'd said when showing me them. "The frog's vindictive. E'll take water wherever he can find it."

I had been with Scab five days now. He still wore the raincoat, which was tied together with orange agricultural string. He wore a pair of baggy jeans (stolen), and some Nike trainers (also stolen). His shaggy beard obscured a ruddy complexion, and matted hair the colour of bread mould clung to his head.

A cold wind guttered the camp fire's flame. Scab waved a bottle of his water and attempted a toast.

"Kings!" he cackled. "Lords of Brighton! Of the world! Knew this was coming! Knew all the while I watched those strutting tossers in their pin-stripes and ties, yapping into their mobiles, rushing to the station in the morning, or cruising about in their Jags!" His voice began to whine, his long fingers scratching a hairy forearm. "None of them saw it coming. I was given signs!" He looked directly at me. "I'm glad you weren't a posh fucker. I might have shot you after all if you'd been one of those." The scratching was furious now, the fingers forcing their way under the sleeve of his raincoat, pushing it up, exposing the lower forearm, on which had been tattooed what looked like – but wasn't – a snake. I eyed the scratching nervously. Perhaps he had scabies. Or fleas.

Scab's revelation had had humble beginnings. One day, very drunk, staggering home through one of the town's suburbs, he'd trodden on something which had squeaked. He'd lifted his foot in surprise, and saw what appeared to be a plastic toy on the pavement. But then the "toy" had hopped.

"Frog," Scab had slurred, steadying himself on a lamp post. "I trod on a frog!"

He had picked up the hapless amphibian, and peered at it closely. It looked glassily at him for some seconds before hopping out of his hands and disappearing behind the low wall of someone's front garden.

He claimed he knew this event had some significance at the time, but in view of what followed, I'm inclined to doubt it. I don't believe he'd trodden on an Australian god.

He thought himself a wild, untameable man who lived, by his own choosing, on the fringes of society. Periodically, he used to vanish into the woods and live off rabbits. At the time of the frog incident, however, he had been holding down a job at a late-night garage and thought himself almost respectable. This "respectability" extended to visits to the library. He would wander in, grab a book off one of the shelves, sit down at the same table as a pretty

woman, and read. For hours.

On this occasion, he picked up a book of Australian Aboriginal mythology. He'd recently seen a tattoo shop offering "dreamtime" style designs and had decided, on impulse, to have one done. The tattoo he'd opted for, after rejecting a kangaroo, had been named Nabunum, the eel.

So: Scab opened the book on Aboriginal mythology, and he gained the revelation he'd been waiting so long for. Tiddalik: the frog who drank the waters of the world.

"And I trod on a frog!"

But there was more. Tiddalik had woken one morning with a terrible thirst. So he began to drink, and drink, and drink. He drank until there was no fresh water left. Trees withered, rivers ran dry, and the ocean was emptied. All the animals despaired. All, but one. All but one, who danced. Scab had looked up from the book, and smiled at the dark shape winding round his arm.

"Dark time comin'," he whispered, "Dark time comin', but Nabunum's here to end it."

Scab had retired to bed. Loud, uneven snores issued from the shack. I stayed up, despite the dusty wind (I'd stolen a smog-mask from a bike shop, and put it on). My eyes still wept, but I didn't want to put on the goggles I'd found.

Away to the south, the summer triangle was high in the sky. The stars Deneb, Vega and Altair, winked at me like old friends. The moon was setting in the west. Three-quarters full, she was a world as dry as ours had become.

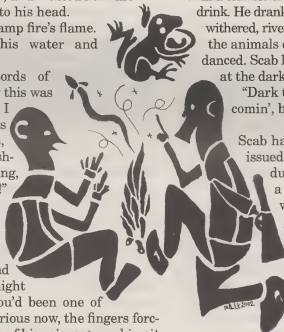
Then I saw the cloud. It came from the south, wispy, high up. I must be mistaken. Perhaps it was just dust. Who knew how the weather systems would function now, in the absence of water?

But it wasn't dust. Another ten minutes and the cloud had been joined by another. I'd stood up by this time, enraptured by the play in the heavens. Storm clouds were erupting from nowhere, their sides highlighted in silver by the moon. Soon, cloud was overhead and my skin prickled.

The first rain drop smacked me right on the top of the head. I considered, fleetingly, waking Scab, but something stopped me. Instead, I ran back to the shack and started unstacking our collection of metal buckets.

Rain was falling in huge tropical drops, thundering on the corrugated iron of the shack's roof. Scab was not awakened. The land, and the desert plain which had been sea, sucked in the water. I should have sought shelter, but I was enraptured and soaked to the skin anyway. I had torn off my smog-mask, and the buckets filled quickly, but before they were half-full, I'd grabbed one and was gulping sweet water. I put the bucket down again, whooped, and began to dance. Water, water, water! I was dancing the dance of Nabunum, the wriggling eel who crawls on land during the rain. I was frenzied, whirling in the midst of the liquid gold falling about me. Finally, exhausted, I wept and sank to my knees.

About 90 minutes later, while I squatted in the doorway of the shack, the rain began to slacken. All the buckets



were full! The last of the torrent ran off the roof. Behind me, I heard Scab stirring, muttering in his sleep. And as he did so, I stepped out from the shack in amazement.

The clouds were vanishing, disappearing, evaporating into the night, and the buckets before me were only three-quarters full! Frantically, I ran to get our empty, plastic sealable water containers. Perhaps the dry atmosphere was speeding evaporation.

When I got back, the buckets were only a quarter full, and I was lucky to get anything at all into the containers. Once emptied, the inside of the buckets were as dry as if they had never seen water. But I left the buckets out again, and sat back in the shack entrance, waiting for the clouds to return. Behind me, Scab growled to himself.

Early in the morning, I was awoken again by drops falling on my face. I had fallen asleep half in and half out of the doorway and my head rested on pebbles. The sky was once again full of cloud, although the rain was not as heavy as it had been the first time. This time, I wanted to wake Scab so he could see.

The old bastard was sleeping deeply, like a stone. I shook him violently and he began to mutter. Finally his eyes opened.

"Scab, Scab!" I said "It's a miracle!" There's been rain in the night!"

"Rain?" he croaked, "Whatdya mean rain, you young fool? Tiddalik's got all the water now."

I shook my head, "No, no! Quick, you must come and see!"

He shook his head, pressing a palm to his forehead, and came to the door.

He laughed. "Are you sure you haven't got a secret stash of alcohol, boy?"

Impossibly, the sky was clear, and lightning in the east. The buckets were empty and the awnings of the hovel did not drip. To the south, a dust cloud was gathering.

4 Scab had to die, I thought. I sat in a hotel bar facing out to sea, overlooking the King's Road and the esplanade, and, through a grimy window, watched the dust clouds swirl outside. My elbows rested on a round, old table of varnished ash. About me were more tables, some with stools placed upside-down on their tops.

The bar was covered with broken glass. Scab had had a tantrum when he'd discovered that every single one of the spirit bottles was empty. Scattered about the periphery of the bar were withered house plants. One had been tipped over, again by Scab, the powdered soil spilled all over the carpet.

Scab was in the ballroom where, like a lunatic Michaelangelo, he was busy spray painting murals everywhere. He appeared to have forgotten his role as Nabunum, the eel who danced. Nabunum, who, alone of all the animals, had made grand father frog laugh and so regurgitate all the water of the world. No, Scab now played some other role in this drama, distinct from the one he'd appointed for himself. But he had reckoned without his fellow performer. Unfortunately, he also had his sawn-off strapped over his shoulder and as I had seen, was adept at handling it.

I would have to get it right, first time, or he would kill

me without hesitation. I was only tolerated now. I stood, shaking slightly, nervous because I was resolved. I had been subject to the whims of King Scab for too long.

He did not sleep until it was pitch dark. He'd not slept for 30 hours: I'd been kept awake the night before by his shouts, the crashing of furniture and the smashing of glass. The floor of the ballroom crunched beneath his feet as he worked. Twice he'd dropped his spray can and his hand had come away bloodied from the floor. He hadn't seemed to notice.

When the windows had darkened, with the dust still rattling against them, he'd found great bundles of candles in the hotel stores, and had distributed them liberally about the ballroom. As darkness fell he lit them, so it was as if he worked, not in a seaside hotel, but in a great old cathedral or a vast, primal cave. When he finished his work he sat like a toad, cross-legged in the middle of the sea of broken glass, hands limp in his lap, staring at the wall.

My torchlight reflected off gold fluting, milky brown walls and cheap seaside paintings. I came to the door of the room in which I had stayed for the last few nights. Unlocking it, I went in and crossed to the bed. Reaching gingerly under the mattress, I pulled out another torch, then two kitchen knives, and finally some fishing line, and a couple of spare batteries.

I carefully strung the fishing line across two strategic points about one third and two thirds down the large staircase. I fastened some more line across the doorway to the ballroom, eight inches from the floor. (I'd hammered some nails in the frame while he'd been smashing furniture earlier that day.)

Making sure I'd got the torch handy in a pocket and one of the knives in my hand, I opened the door.

He was still slumped cross-legged, snoring loudly, emphysemic lungs bubbling with each breath. The shotgun was slung across his back.

I padded as silently I could, freezing for a moment with each soft crunch as I trod on glass. The place glowed dim gold in the sickly candlelight, the corners of the room grading to black.

It seemed to take hours to cross that room. Each step towards Scab, I knew, increased the risk for me. But this was something which must be done.

When I reached his side, I put the blade of the knife close to his exposed neck. The knife trembled with my hand, near his drumming carotid. I had to do it.

Too late, I saw the eye, glassy, half open, staring at me. Desperately I clawed at the shotgun, but strong hands were already reaching for me. As I pulled, the strap broke and the gun clattered across the floor. He gave me a mighty shove, and I fell, skidding a couple of feet across the polished floor on my back. Terror lending me speed, I picked myself up and ran for the exit.

Scab picked up the gun, and fired, but I slipped on some glass and half fell. The pellets rattled over me into the wall above my head.

He screamed and ran at me. I ran to the door, but in

my terror I had forgotten the line strung across the exit. It took my feet from under me. Scab was running too fast to stop on the slippery floor. I think he tried to jump over me, but I felt his toes at my heel, and he crashed on top of me. There was an almighty bang.

It was a minute before I could breathe again. I lay, prone, under the heavy body of Scab, warm blood trickling onto my hair and down my neck. Scab's mouth was right by my ringing ear and, as he died, he whispered a name, repeatedly.

When I could no longer feel the warmth of his breath, I pushed and he rolled. Somehow, the second barrel had emptied itself through his jaw, pellets smashing through the palate, into the brain.

I sat, panting, for some moments. Nabunum. He had named me Nabunum: the one who dances for the rain. Well, I would oblige him. I stood, my head light with a sudden euphoria, knowing the tyrant to be dead, and danced. It was a wild, jerky jig. But I danced to the rhythm of my heart, a living, beating defiance of the dead land outside. I think Tiddalik was amused.

There was a white flash from outside, followed by a mighty, explosive CRACK! Lightning flickered again and again, trailed by aggressive growls of thunder. And then the rain came. Huge splashes struck the window, dribbling trails in the thin layer of dust on the pane.

I ran from the hotel lobby, back to the bar where I had been earlier that day, to watch the rain. The downpour had already washed away much of the dust coating the outside of the windows, and I could see some way out onto the dried sea-plain. Gazing out towards the horizon, I froze in horror.

A mighty frog sat, vast and proud, the lightning licking his sides. Its cavernous mouth was yawning, and out of it thundered a tidal wave.

Wanting to see more, I rushed out into the rain. It was pounding so hard that my head stung, but I ran onto the street to watch the spectacle. But by the time I reached the esplanade, the frog was fading into billowing black cloud.

A mighty, slate-grey wall raced for the shore. I was frozen in terror. The tidal wave would surely smash the sea-front buildings to smithereens. But as I watched it approach, the wave front smoothed from a glassy wall to a weighty ripple. The waves which broke at the old water mark were big, but no greater than on any other stormy night. And they brought something with them.

The shore was being covered with giant spawn. Each lap of the sea brought more of it, bubbling up from the depths, rolling onto the shore, clumps of jelly globes adhering to each other.

As they arrived on the beach, the globes were flattening into shapeless globs. Within each one, things writhed.

I edged towards the nearest of the spawn. Underwater, the globe would have been approaching six or seven feet in diameter. The surface was transparent, and I could see something struggling inside it, but the dim light and fogging of the gel made it difficult to see.

I peered closer, and suddenly, a human face pressed against the membrane, eyes and mouth welded shut. Framed by dark, curly hair, it nosed the imprisoning

skin, seeking escape. Hands pawed the inside of the egg, attempting purchase, fingers pushing and distorting the membrane like plastic. Finally, the skin burst. A naked human being lay gasping at my feet, its skin pimpling in the cold rain.

All about me, people were being reborn. I watched their first feeble attempts to stand as the rain washed off the birthing fluids. I watched their clumsy first steps. They were like ancient lobe-finned fish, newly come out of the sea, gasping on a prehistoric shore – men and women, stumbling on the wet pebbles. They were every age, too, the old, teenagers, children. And there were those whom I recognized. Here was the bloke who ran the fish and chip shop on the sea front, rivers of water streaming off his great hairy belly. There was Nancy, the girl at the travel centre, her chest panting in the cold, nipples hard – although the sight was unerotic; for her eyes were dead, her movements robotic.

The people began to return to the town, stumbling off the beach, movements automatic but purposeful, naked feet slapping on wet concrete steps, a human herd, migrating back to its rightful place. It took hours, but the last was gone before dawn. Then there were only the gulls, twitching out of their cocoons of jelly, cawing feebly on the shingle, feathers glistening in the rain.

5 It is the tenth day since the rains stopped, and I have finally forced myself to return to the beach.

The day is warm and there are plenty of deck chairs out. I'm wearing a long-sleeved top.

Toddlers waddle, grasping gaily coloured beach balls like substitute bellies. Sunbathers smear lotion on white skin. Teenage boys yell and splash in the surf.

I have bought a cup of tea from a beach-side fish-and-chip shop, and sit alone at a table. Steam issues from the tea, which is tasteless and expensive.

The sea is beautiful, but soured, a deep green blue, splashed with gold by the sun. The horizon is slightly hazed and there are yachts out to sea. It's a sight which used to inspire.

My flatmate wants me to move out. I have, he complains, become intolerable, and he's quite justified in saying so. I've been skulking in my room, only scuttling out to the kitchen when he isn't around, and only venturing out of the house when my supplies of food run low. We are in the middle of a hot spell, but I haven't been able to face the world until today, even keeping my curtains drawn. It's taken a mighty effort of will to come out, but I imagined that it might help the healing. I scratch at my left arm idly and then stop myself because it's becoming a habit.

I've thought about seeing a plastic surgeon, perhaps to have it removed, but that would mean facing up to its materiality. The reality of the mark implies questions that I dare not face. I pull my sleeve further down my wrist at the thought, for beneath, black as pitch, Nabunum winds about my forearm.

Matt Colborn's two previous stories in these pages were "The City in the Dusk" (issue 165) and "The Proteus Egg" (issue 169). Still in his 20s, he comes from Lincolnshire, and recently completed a PhD at the University of Sussex.

Fondly Remembered

AN APPRECIATION OF JAMES WHITE

David Langford

Sector Twelve General Hospital is one of the most charming and intelligently wish-fulfilling conceptions in science fiction, and its Irish creator James White – tall, bespectacled, balding, soft-spoken and eternally self-deprecating – was himself something of a charmer. Not merely a nice man, he was the cause of niceness in others. No one in the sf community could ever dream of being horrid to James.

While others joined literary or fan factions and entangled themselves in heated feuding, James could be found at British conventions solemnly inducting qualified attendees – those who like himself were several inches over six feet – into the S.O.P.O.A.H. or Society Of Persons Of Average Height. A luckily short-sighted few had the further credentials required for admission to the inner circle, the S.O.P.O.A.H.(W.G.) (With Glasses). Naturally James continued to treat the inner circle, the outer circle and the great unwashed masses beyond with identical benevolence, which somehow lent all those other embattled in-groups the same aura of gentle silliness.

James was and is much loved as a science-fiction writer. I fondly remember scouring British bookshops in the 1960s for instalments of his Sector General space-hospital saga, which in those days was appearing in maddeningly brief instalments in E. John Carnell's original anthology *New Writings in SF*, later edited by Kenneth Bulmer. The last to feature there was the first story in this volume, "Spacebird" from Bulmer's *New Writings in SF* 22, published in 1973. British fans of Sector General had a long wait for this xenobiological extravaganza's inclusion in the 1980 *Ambulance Ship*. Americans

had to wait longer still – until now, in fact – since the 1979 US version of *Ambulance Ship* omitted "Spacebird."

As every sf reader should know, Sector Twelve General Hospital is a huge interstellar construction built in a spirit of glorious idealism by many co-operating galactic races, with its 384 levels equipped to simulate the home environment of any conceivable alien patient. Conceivable, that is, to the builders' imaginations. From the outset James gleefully harassed his Sector General medics with a steady stream of inconceivables and seeming-impossibles, ranging in size from an intelligent virus and spacefaring barnacles, via beasties without hearts who must keep rolling forever to prevent their circulation from halting, and a levitating brontosaurus called Emily, to "macro" life-forms like the miles-long Midgard Serpent which is discovered scattered through space in dismantled form and must be painstakingly reassembled, or the continent-sized inhabitant of planet Meatball whose treatment in *Major Operation* requires not so much surgery as military action.

In short, Sector General is the definitive medical sf series. Its precursors include L. Ron Hubbard's moderately dire *Ole Doc Methuselah* stories and the competent hackwork of Murray Leinster's Med Service tales. It may perhaps have helped inspire Piers Anthony's amusing exploits of an interstellar dentist in *Prostho Plus*. Nothing else in the genre is at all comparable.

To call these stories' repeated pattern of medical mystery and elucidation a formula is far from being a put-down. As with detective fiction, the basic pattern offers scope for endless variations limited only by ingenu-

ity and narrative sleight, with James's lifelong fascination with medical techniques clearly visible throughout. There's even room in Sector General for G.K. Chesterton's favourite mystery trope of the Happy Surprise, whereby suitable illumination causes sinister and misleading clues to reverse themselves or cancel out, revealing that despite all appearances there has been no crime (or serious threat to health) at all.

Several well-loved props run through the sequence. The most famous is the species classification system which sums up a creature's shape and physiology in four terse letters. Theoretically this coding can extend to many further "decimal places," but the first four suffice for practical and narrative purposes. Earth-humans are DBDG and "similar" warm-blooded oxygen-breathers have similar codes, with teddy-bear Nidians and Orligians also being DBDG while the furry, caterpillar-shaped Kelgians are DBLE. Weirder creatures include chlorine-breathing PVSJs and psi-talented V-codes. One buried joke concerns the unfortunate Goggleskan species of *Star Healer*, classification FOKT, who are almost unable to prevent themselves from forming mindlessly destructive mobs. This, by intention, greatly tickled the local sf fan group in the traditionally tough city of Glasgow, Scotland: the Friends of Kilgore Trout.

The classification scheme began as homage to E.E. "Doc" Smith's perhaps unworkably human-centred version from *Grey Lensman* and *Children of the Lens*, in which true Homo Sapiens is classed AAAAAA while the most

alien monstrosities imaginable – the horrid Ploorans in their cryogenic winter metamorphosis – register as “straight Z’s to ten or twelve places”. It is a happy coincidence that James’s first-ever published words, in his and Walt Willis’s fanzine *Slant 4*, were firmly inserted into a contribution that was being horrid to Doc Smith: “[These opinions of the great Smith are not those of the typesetter, J. White.]”

Nearly half a century later he was honoured with the 1998 Skylark Award, presented by the New England SF Society in memory of Doc Smith and his Lensmen, and so consisting of an absolutely enormous magnifying lens. James found this practical as well as decorative, since by then his sight was failing to the stage where he needed such a glass to read even large type on the computer screen.

Besides demoting humans from AAAAAA to the modest DBDG, James distanced himself in other little ways from the traditional sf anthropocentrism of an era when John W. Campbell still stalked the earth. (It should be remembered that the first Sector General story appeared in 1957). Smart and sympathetic aliens are foregrounded from the very beginning. Virtually all the hospital’s top medical consultants, the eccentric Diagnosticians, are nonhuman. When a roving ambulance ship is introduced, it’s named *Rhabwar* after a great doctor from the history of its Tralthan FGLI builders. When *Rhabwar*’s first mission appears to be a simple rescue of boring old humans and someone remarks, “There will be no juicy extra-terrestrial cases on this trip,” he is crushingly answered by a Kelgian nurse: “To us, Earth-human DBDG’s are juicy extra-terrestrials.” In three later novels beginning with *Code Blue – Emergency* (1987), the viewpoint characters are aliens who are not only as likeable as the human medics but every bit as accident-prone. Real equality includes the equal right to make blazing mistakes.

Another notable and fruitful series prop is Sector General’s system of Educator tapes, which help prepare doctors for other-species surgery by uploading the skills of an expert from the relevant world. The dark side of this piece of narrative convenience is that a complete and often cantankerous e-personality is loose in your head, objecting to your vile choice of food (a regular Sector General canteen sight is a Senior Physician eating “visually non-controversial” sandwiches of uncertain content, with his eyes tight shut) and possibly imposing strange glandular urges. In the short “Countercharm”, series hero Senior Physician Conway uses a tape recorded from a randy Melfan ELNT, and finds himself dis-

tracted from vital operations by an uncontrollable case of the hots for his gorgeous Melfan pupil – who happens to be a giant crab.

The regular human cast includes wisecracking, problem-solving Conway (who for ages appeared to have no first name – very late in the series it’s revealed to be Peter); his busty girlfriend and eventual wife Nurse (later Pathologist) Murchison, whose forename I have yet to detect; and the irascible Chief Psychologist O’Mara, wielder of deadly sarcasm and – at his worst – a feared politeness. Reasons for O’Mara’s peculiarly blunt, abrasive nature and multi-species insight lie at the heart of the penultimate Sector General novel, the elegiac *Mind Changer*, which allows us inside this thorny character’s head for only the second time in the entire sequence.

Meanwhile Conway’s closest friend is the universally popular Dr Prillica, a fragile GLNO e-t who resembles a giant and beautiful dragonfly, carries diplomacy to the point of fibbing since its empathic talent makes it cringe from hostile emotion, and likes to weave its canteen spaghetti into an edible cable to be chomped while hovering in mid-air. Sector General’s staff and wards contain countless further aliens, each with their own quirky charm – engaging stock characters in a comedy of humours shaped by exotic racial traits. It’s a running joke that the hottest hospital gossip concerns sexual antics in the methane level whose ethereal, crystalline SNLU patients live at 120-140 degrees below zero.

Thus the sequence offers copious fun and a warm feeling of extended

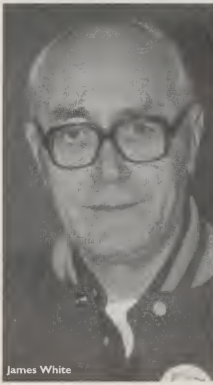
community in addition to its xenobiological cleverness. “Almost wilfully upbeat,” wrote John Clute in the *Encyclopedia of SF*. What it also contains – showing clearly through transparent storytelling that puts on no literary airs – is the compassion and rare anger of a good man. From that first novella in 1957 to *Double Contact* 42 years later, it is repeatedly stressed that xenophobia in all its forms is a loathsome disease requiring salutary treatment. The Monitor Corps, this loose interstellar Federation’s tough but kindly police force, hates war and stamps it out ruthlessly with non-lethal weapons like intimidation and sleepy gas. At Sector General’s bleakest hour in *Star Surgeon*, when the hospital is besieged by a space fleet and under missile attack, the defending Monitors grit their teeth and accept that “fanatically tolerant” medical staff will – must – give enemy casualties the same degree of care as their own wounded.

It’s impossible not to see these gentle stories’ deep horror of war as fuelled by the author’s revulsion at events in his home town of Belfast. Generally he downplayed these feelings, but the shades of melancholy emerged in his 1975 fanzine contribution “The Exorcists of IF,” which miraculously preserved a light touch while mourning the ghosts of an older IF (Irish Fandom) then partly sunnied by the Troubles, and which has with some justice been called the finest piece of fan fiction ever written. It is collected in *The White Papers* (1996).

On a related note, I have a vivid memory of James at the 1992 British national sf convention “Illumination,” held in a Blackpool seafront hotel and featuring a hugely noisy fireworks display on the adjacent beach. Thunderous detonations of mortar shells could be felt as visceral jolts; the vibrations set off car alarms all around the hotel. Amid these terrific bangs and flashes and siren-wailings, James’s plaintive Irish voice murmured into my ear: “They’re trying to make me feel at home.”

A later Sector General volume makes a deadpan gesture to the death-or-glory school of military sf, with war and violence being presented as a sick, enfeebled species’s last remaining means of sexual stimulation. The Marquis de Sade might recognize his own face in that mirror. One early story spoke wistfully of “the diagnosis and treatment of a diseased interstellar culture, entailing the surgical removal of deeply rooted prejudice and insane moral values...” If only.

It’s worth noting that in the James White universe, outright villains are extraordinarily few. Even that “diseased culture” which despicably



James White

attacks the hospital (via armed forces duped into believing it a prison and torture chamber) is rotten only at the top, and reforms itself in the light of sweet reason. The most murderous-seeming threats within Sector General all prove to be confused innocents: examples include a traumatized, out-of-control pet, a pre-sentient saurian, and frightened alien children with odd biological defences.

One of the few characters ever to have engaged in deliberate killing is Monitor Fleet Commander (later Sector Marshal) Dermot, who has spent his life expiating his role in the small but bloody conflict of "Occupation: Warrior" (1959), a story whose Sector General links were removed by an editor who thought it too grim for the series. Now Dermot's colossal Emperor-class battleship *Vespasian* is chiefly called on for shows of force or vast rescue manoeuvres – as in *Major Operation*, where it literally has to hold a giant tourniquet, and the present volume's "Combined Operation."

That underlying moral sense illuminates such later and slightly darker segments as *Star Healer*, where after all the fireworks of his brilliant diagnoses and miracle cures, Conway is kicked upstairs to try his hand at the full responsibilities of a Diagnostician and to tackle cases that can't be solved with a single dazzling intuition. Instead he must brace himself for tougher tussles: with the grim evolutionary dilemmas of the Gogleskans who aren't approach each other and the reflexively violent Protectors who cannot be

approached, with terminal injuries and recognition of the need for triage after major accidents, with normally cheerful and ultra-tough Hudlar FROB space roustabouts who have been reduced to a pitiable state by post-transplant shock or crippling senility.

Before this chance of promotion, though, the lighter-hearted *Ambulance Ship* and *Sector General* take Conway far away from the massive presence of the hospital and its permanent staff, to investigate medical enigmas with no immediate resources but the tiny *Rhabwar* team. This makes for a pleasant series of shorter adventures revisiting favourite auctorial themes.

Without too overtly giving away surprises, it can be said that most of *Ambulance Ship* and *Sector General* see our man working his way thoughtfully around two pet concepts which crop up elsewhere in the sequence. One is best phrased as a question: is there any inherent biological or physical handicap to space travel which sufficient intelligence and ingenuity cannot overcome? Series readers will remember that a certain immodest alien in *Major Operation*, whose deeply weird physiology should have trapped him for life on the sea bed, is first encountered as an orbiting astronaut.

Stories building on this question in *Ambulance Ship* and *Sector General* confront the baffled but eventually insightful Conway with five even more extreme cases. How can the dream of space possibly apply to e-t species who are blind, or limbless, or utterly devoid of mechanical technology, or helpless

prisoners within insensately violent host-bodies, or larger than the greatest monsters of Earth's deep seas? Aha.

The stories' other repeated issue is the cheeky challenging of a Sector General axiom: that cross-species infection is as a rule impossible and that Conway and friends therefore need never fear catching something awful from their patients. Three clever exceptions are presented, though not of the kind that disprove the rule. Gulfs of time, a common chemistry, and the established (through Prilicla) premise of psychic empathy all sneak around the apparent constraints. A fourth and particularly far-out possibility – already planted in the early *Star Surgeon* – becomes the heart of the medical mystery in the later novel *Final Diagnosis*.

Among this volume's shorts the odd man out is "Accident," set before the building of Sector General and linking it to James's moving war or antiwar story "Tableau," which can be found in his 1970 collection *The Aliens Among Us*. An all too credible accident in a multi-species spaceport facility, and the resulting nightmare struggle with intractable wreckage in an increasingly toxic atmosphere, crystallize the need for medical and paramedical expertise that extends over many different physiologies and biochemistries. This plants the seed of Sector General, and of the recurring notion – found also in James's non-series stories – that being able to give medical assistance to a distressed alien brings a priceless bonus of goodwill to the ever-tricky situation of First Contact.

Erratum

Gremlins got into Nick Lowe's *Mutant Popcorn* column in *Interzone* 174 and duplicated a chunk of text from later in the article while deleting a portion of earlier text, making nonsense of a perfectly good paragraph. The paragraph that begins at the bottom of page 33 and ends at the drop capital on the next page should have read as follows –

The second giveaway Watson gem is the glorious, if somewhat garbled, mind-boggler in the angel droids' explanation of why bimillennial boy David's aeons-lost Mom can't be resurrected for more than a day: "The very fabric of spacetime itself appeared to store information about every event that had taken place within it." It took us a while to figure out what we were being told here, until we realized that the final film bears the memory traces of *all its previous versions*, heaped higgledy-

piggledy on top of one another in a way that has abandoned all aspiration to any kind of unified narrative sense. The entire finished plot has been strung together out of set pieces that long since ceased to join up, with hasty dollops of narrative glue in place of the necessary logical and motivational links. The most extreme case is Rouge City, evidently at one stage a vastly ambitious conception intended to encapsulate the entire state of the future, but here reduced to a colossal empty design space, a warehouse for Kubrick's cabinets full of Fangorn artwork, in which all that actually happens is that (a new low in screenwriting desperation) our heroes are reduced to interrogating a search engine for any clue as to where the plot should go, something they might as easily have done at a roadside booth.

The Editors

As already indicated, James White was a highly popular sf author and convention guest whom everyone liked and whose kindness extended even to such loathed creatures ("straight Z's to ten or twelve places") as parodists and critics. I happen to know this, because in my wickedness I wrote both a Sector General parody and a critical essay on the series, and each time James replied with a letter too embarrassingly generous for even such an egotist as David Langford to quote.

His death from a stroke in 1999 came too soon – he was 71 – but was mercifully quick. A lot of us miss him badly. Reading the Sector General books yet again brings back so many happy memories. It's hackneyed but entirely true to say that I envy readers who are meeting them for the first time.

David Langford

Note: The above piece will appear in the book *Alien Emergencies: A Sector General Omnibus*, by James White (Tor Books, April 2002, \$19.95).

It may be an accident that the first edition of *Black House*, by Stephen King and Peter Straub (Random House, \$28.95; HarperCollins, £17.99), and the first edition of *Bleak House* (1853), by Charles Dickens, are both 624 pages long. It may be an accident, but it's no mistake: because the two books go together. A great house, which stands in for the entire world, lies at the heart of both; King and Straub refer to *Bleak House* constantly in their text; *Black House* is told in a big-voice present-tense panopticon style unmistakably derived from Dickens's narrative strategy in *Bleak House*, a strategy designed (in part) to make positively radiant the threads and interstices that web individual events and places to the condition of the world as a whole; a ferocious incandescent joviality lights both books; both books have a lot of story to get through, though *Black House*, had some editor been allowed a free hand to wash it down, might have been shrunk quite a bit (see below); and both books – this follows from everything already mentioned – are absolutely crammed with storyteller.

(Right away we should deal with one non-issue: which of these two big long-breathed authors, King and Straub, wrote what parts of *Black House*. Superficial brand markers aside – the Straubian jazz bits, which could have been inserted like raisins into a cake by King, and the Kingly loathsome-wriggles-vomit-from-orifice macros, which are just as likely to have been keyed in by Straub – it is very difficult to tell who wrote what, and not very interesting to try to find out. Very very unusually, the auctorial we of the book is the actual first person plural, not the imperial we I started this paragraph with; but the joint voices of Stephen King and Peter Straub, speaking together as we, are seamless, barbershop. The we says “we” in one voice; and all the while we know they are two. It is most extraordinary. All the important parts of the book are told humming. It is a joy to listen.)

Black House is a sequel to the same authors' *The Talisman* (1984) but although it is a smaller story than its predecessor – a kind of anecdote told in a corner of the big war King has been nosing towards in his Dark Tower sequence – it is an almost immeasurably better book. Instead of Dickens, *The Talisman* takes guidance from Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Twelve-year-old Jack Sawyer – whose mother, a former queen of the silver screen, is dying of cancer – must enter and travel westwards through a parallel world called the Territories – which is ruled by a dying queen, Jack's mother's “Twin-ner” – in order to find the talisman

It is a Joy to Read

John Clute

which will heal both worlds by healing their queens. It is a great, episodic, epic, thumping story. Childe Jack – who is a classic Jack in this world, and is rightly called Jason in the Territories – quests West and wins. That King and Straub never used ten words where 50 would do, and kept telling each other's bits again twice or thrice, hardly mattered: though reading it was sometimes like climbing through a whole train of box cars to reach the engine, the story still pulled us like magnets. *Black House* is different.

We are in the first years of the 21st century; and we aren't in Kansas any more. The fantasy quest-propulsion of *The Talisman* gives way in *Black House* to horror, where Quest becomes Hook, and catches in your flesh from behind, and no matter how fast you run it's never a Quest you're on but an Attempted Escape. Jack Sawyer is now 20 or so years older. He has forgotten *The Talisman* completely, because it is dangerous to remember Eden, and has recently retired from his successful police career, and gone to ground, because the corpse of a black man in California reminded him of the Territories. But this reminder is a message, and Jack's attempts to ignore what turns out to be a cry for help from the Territories only make matters worse.

Black House is set where Jack has gone to ground: the small Wisconsin town of French Landing on the banks of the upper Mississippi, beset by a lot of fog straight out of *Bleak House*. What happens here, in this world, may be dreadful enough, but it only shadows what is happening else-

where. Here, in French Landing, a serial killer has been abducting children, eating their buttocks before killing them, writing sadistic letters to the children's mothers, spewing body parts hither and yon. The pleadings of the police chief, who is an old friend, and the increasing number of holes in his amnesia about the Territories, force Jack out of retirement; and the book seems tantalizingly about to become a detective thriller.

But the serial killer is soon identified – if only by the authors, who often address their readers directly, as Dickens used to, reminding them that they are reading a Story which is being told, revealing in advance what is about to happen there – and it is soon clear that the killer is a puppet of a much more terrible figure from beyond. That this figure is himself a satrap of a much more terrible figure who is immured in a Dark Tower and whose ultimate aim is to shatter the sweet equipose of all the worlds which will allow Him or It to translate all that is plenitude and green into ash and shit, need not detain us here: this is Stephen King country, where we may go later, in other Gunslinger books, where it will be King's job alone to juggle the hierarchies-of-evil guff he's prone to. Here, only the local conflict is of interest.

The *Black House* of the title is an edifice, bigger inside than out, full of mirrors and halls and stairs that plunge gaping downwards through portals into the other worlds. Deep inside *Black House*, deep in the rotting core of the bound worlds, the serial killer has stored a special victim, upon whose fate these worlds, one of which is ours, turn. Jack goes there to rescue him, but not alone, for he is no longer a Childe, though he retains the intense transparent glowing beauty of the Good Childe. His companions – the police chief, and two members of a motorcycle gang who read Schopenhauer and have founded a really great microbrewery – go down all the way with him, into the hades of the corrupted core. They help him rescue the person who must be rescued. They help destroy the satrap, a shapeshifting monster whose head dwarfs his body and who often has only one eye and who is described as resembling both Humpty Dumpty and William F. Buckley, Jr; his puppet, the serial killer, has already been killed, very effectively. The posse returns to Wisconsin.

All ends well. Even some heavily telegraphed twists to the very tail of the story only serve to prepare Jack for more adventures, in some other book, perhaps as skilful as this one, we can only hope. For we realize, perhaps rather slowly, that the big seven-

Continued on page 63

Heroes of the Marketplace

Tim Robins

Enterprise, the latest addition to what fans unashamedly call the *Star Trek* franchise, arrived on Britain's television screens in January 2002. I intend to become a big fan of the series, but not an uncritical one. Where *Enterprise* explores the fictional origins of *Star Trek*, I will take this opportunity to examine the actual origins of what is now called "Classic Trek" or *Star Trek: The Original Series* (*ST:TOS* for short). But I am going to write the original series' history in a different way to that found in promotional books and magazines, official and unofficial.

Popular accounts of *ST:TOS*'s origins see the series as the work of heroic individuals, most notably the series' acknowledged creator Gene Roddenberry. An article by Andy Lane – in the *Star Trek* anniversary edition of the *Radio Times* (15–21 September 2001) – is typical in this respect. Lane writes that the new series, *Enterprise*, inherits a history "more catalogued than that of some small countries. That history came about through the vision of one man – TV producer Gene Roddenberry – and, despite the differences in society and technology that have occurred since [*Star Trek*]'s inception, Roddenberry's vision has remained intact."

This way of telling the history of *ST:TOS* seems to have been instigated in 1968 by Stephen E. Whitfield's and Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek: The Making of a Television Series* (Titan). In the book's opening chapter, Whitfield writes, "Roddenberry was determined to use *Star Trek* to break through the television censorship barrier... By using science fiction yarns of far-off planets, he was certain he could disguise the fact he was actually talking about politics, sex, economics, the stupidity of war, and half a hundred other vital subjects usually prohibited on television."

Academic Henry Jenkins, writing in his and John Tulloch's book *Science Fiction Audiences* (Routledge), notes that identifying Roddenberry as the

creator of *ST:TOS* has allowed fans to distinguish the series "from the bulk of commercial television which they see as faceless and formulaic, lacking aesthetic and ideological integrity." Roddenberry effectively becomes the author of *TOS* and his utopian vision explains the form and content of the series. By the same token, changes or distortions to *TOS* are attributed to his lack of participation – as in, for instance, *TOS*'s final season.

There are some difficulties here. Accounts of individual creativity tend to rely on a "great man" – or perhaps, in *ST:TOS*'s case, this should be a "Great Bird of the Galaxy" (as Roddenberry was known) – theory of history. The "great man" theory sees historical change as the result of the acts of powerful individuals (usually white males). Many popular histories of TV programmes are written in this way. Their accounts tend to be structured as heroic narratives in which a creator battles against the Establishment (often represented as the American television networks).

Roddenberry seems to have made himself the hero of his own life story. At the beginning of Roger Fulton's entry on *ST:TOS* in his *Encyclopedia of TV Science Fiction* (Boxtree) Roddenberry is quoted as saying, "I realized that by creating a separate world, a new world with new rules, I could make statements about sex, religion, Vietnam, unions, politics and intercontinental missiles. Indeed, we did make them on *Star Trek*; we were sending messages, and fortunately they all got by the network."

One of the difficulties with "great man" accounts is that the great man is represented as existing in opposition to or in advance of society. So, Roddenberry, as the heroic creator of *Star Trek*, is seen as a transcendent visionary existing in a critical position above and beyond the institutions of TV. In fact such accounts of the production of his work on *ST:TOS* can hardly be regarded as histories because Rodden-

berry comes to be so ahead of his time, and his vision so timeless, that he seems to exist outside of History itself.

A further difficulty occurs when the "Great Bird of the Galaxy" theory is coupled with accounts that see *ST:TOS* as a reflection of the social conflicts that characterized American society in the 1960s. For instance, Andy Lane explains that Roddenberry's vision was of a TV series that could use SF to address social issues. He gives the following example: "Race was a big issue in American society at the time *Star Trek* premiered. Roddenberry reflected this issue [by making] his vision of the future fully integrated, with whites and blacks, men and women working together in perfect harmony."

If the realization of Roddenberry's vision is a reflection of reality, Roddenberry himself becomes transparent. His greatest creative act is to vanish at the moment of creation. Similarly, if the series' writers are seen as simply sending messages about society, the programme itself becomes a transparent conduit for the transmission of those messages.

It's not just Roddenberry and *ST:TOS* that tend to become invisible in popular accounts of the programme's history, so too does television. This invisibility is implicit in the metaphor of TV as a "window on the world," but it is also the result of attributing the content of TV to the work of powerful individuals and social forces. If the content of *ST:TOS* is seen as an effect of Roddenberry's will or a reflection of society, then social processes of television production and the specific ways in which their products – TV programmes – represent the world dematerialize into the ether. Simply expanding the list of individuals who worked on a given series does little to address this problem.

Here I'll try to avoid these difficulties by developing another approach to the original series' history, one that sees the series as a product of a combined film and television indus-

try's routine need to seek out new programming, amass audiences, generate advertising revenue, accrue profit and reduce the risks of venturing into the known and unknown territories of the media marketplace.

ST:TOS premiered on America's NBC (National Broadcasting Company) network on 8th September 1966. The series ran for three seasons totalling 79 fifty-minute episodes, before being cancelled due to low ratings. Once syndicated, the programme gained a loyal following and its fans have helped sustain a burgeoning industry of licensed and unlicensed products. Lane's article usefully outlines the extent of this – four spinoff TV series (one animated), nine films, over 340 novels, and more than 20 episodes of *Star Trek* "covering all four live-action series transmitted every week, spread across three different channels (BBC 2, Sky 1 and E4)" in the UK.

For those who watched the series on British TV in the late 1960s, *ST:TOS* seemed typical of American programming – a filmed action adventure that contrasted sharply with the BBC's videotaped productions. Where BBC dramas, including *Doctor Who*, seemed to be the result of a studio-bound theatrical tradition, American programmes seemed firmly and unsurprisingly located in Hollywood. However, *ST:TOS*'s format was by no means natural or inevitable. Instead, it was the product of a historically changing relationship between American networks, Hollywood film studios and corporate sponsors and their advertising agencies.

In the early 1950s, most television programmes made and screened in America were transmitted live (80 percent of all network programmes in 1953). These programmes were made not in Hollywood but on the East Coast of America. Formats were adapted from theatre and the radio. In contrast, *ST:TOS* was a filmed, one-hour, episodic series, made by a Hollywood studio, and it exemplified the changes that had taken place in the production of programming for American TV over the previous decade.

A model for *ST:TOS* was the B movie and it was no coincidence that the rise of the film series on American television coincided with the decline of B-movie production in Hollywood. After World War II, the American movie industry had unexpectedly gone into recession. At first this was because of suburbanization and a refocusing of consumer spending on luxury goods for the home. In Tino Balio's edited collection *Hollywood in the Information Age* (Unwin), the TV historian writes, "TV did not make significant inroads into movie-going until the mid-fifties." And it wasn't until the

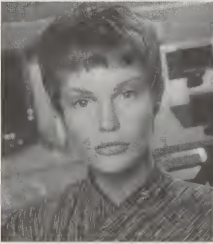


Enterprise –
Above: Captain Jonathan Archer (Scott Bakula)
with his new crew.
Below: T'Pol is played by Jolene Blalock

mid-1950s that Hollywood made inroads into production for television.

Of course, some of the major Hollywood studios had involved themselves in TV as early as the 1940s, but after teething troubles – including Paramount's ill-fated investment in the DuMont network – there had been an effective "boycott" of television. This ended when Disney agreed to produce programming for ABC in return for the network buying stock in Disneyland. ABC also signed a deal with Warner Brothers who tested the TV marketplace with an experimental mix of episodic series and anthologies.

Although today *ST:TOS* and other "Trek" properties are owned by Paramount, back in the 1950s it wasn't the Hollywood Majors who were the big players in television. *ST:TOS* was made for the NBC network by Desilu, an independent company founded by Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz and dedicated to the production of one programme – *I Love Lucy*. In the mid-'50s the sitcom was earning Desilu \$1 million a year in revenue. This money was used to diversify production for the networks and syndication. Programmes included wholly-owned series (*I Love Lucy*, *December Bride*)



and co-productions (*Sheriff of Cochise*, *The Texan*) and series made by other companies using Desilu's facilities.

Christopher Anderson, in *Hollywood TV* (University of Texas), writes that for the year 1959-1960, Desilu – contributing four network programmes with a total budget of \$10.5 million – was ranked fourth among providers of TV programming. Warner Brothers headed the list with ten programmes at \$30 million, but the rest of the companies were independents. Anderson writes, "Desilu, Four Star, Revue and Screen Gems all became publicly held corporations within the three-year period 1958-1961. By diversifying into many forms of television production and distribution, four companies that had begun as producers of a single television series in the early 1950s achieved a status among Hollywood's most prosperous studios."

ST:TOS's funding and eventual broadcast by NBC can be seen as part of the network's on-going strategic relationship with its parent company, RCA, who had been America's major manufacturer of television sets since the technology was unveiled to the general public at the World's Trade Fair in 1939. For RCA, TV programmes had been a way of selling TV sets. It was the income from sales of the hardware rather than software that had been important.

Balio notes, "NBC's programming strategy reflected in part its function as a subsidiary of RCA." So the fact that *ST:TOS* was filmed rather than broadcast live had much to do with RCA's attempts to reposition itself in the market for consumer goods. In the 1940s this had meant broadcasting high-quality, live programming heavily promoted on radio as an event and designed to "make first-time television viewers out of heretofore satisfied radio listeners."

Balio writes that, after 1956, "NBC's programming radically changed to rely on the routines of series programming produced by West Coast suppliers on film." This move was precipitated by RCA shifting funding away from subsidising NBC's television programmes to sell TV sets and towards the promotion of other domestic goods such as refrigerators and a fledgling computer market. Gone were prestigious live productions such as *Peter Pan* (for children) and *Richard III* (for adults). NBC's new look consisted of westerns (*Wagon Train*, *Restless Gun*), action series (*M Squad*) and game shows.

Where NBC's live shows had been loss leaders, new more cost-effective programming was required. Filmed series had the added benefit of being able to be repeated in syndication and sold overseas. However, Herb Solow, Executive in Charge of Production of

ST:OTOS, suggests that RCA's interest in profiting from television hardware might have been a factor in keeping the series on air for a second season.

While *ST:OTOS* was ranked low in the general network ratings, it was the highest-rated NBC colour series on television. Solow's and Bob Justman's book, *Inside Star Trek: The Real Story* (Pocket Books) reprints an advertisement for RCA's Victor colour TV set that promotes *ST:OTOS* along with the technology. The copy for the ad, placed in *TV Guide*, ran "when you're first in color TV there's got to be a reason." While the rest of the copy pointed to technical specifications of the RCA Victor colour TV set, illustrations of Kirk and Spock suggested that reason for it all was *Star Trek*.

As a product of the television industry and as a cultural commodity, *ST:OTOS*'s aesthetic and economic aspects were therefore inextricably linked. The series' gaudy aesthetics owed a lot to the covers of pulp magazines – the costumes of the ship's crew were only slightly less bright than the work of Frank R. Paul – but this colourfulness clearly had an economic function. Similarly, although the structure of *ST:OTOS*'s stories drew on cultural conventions of storytelling – including ascending action, climax and denouement – their structure also met economic imperatives.

ST:OTOS's pre-title sequence prologue, the title sequence itself, the following four acts, epilogue and end credits are structured around advertising breaks, with "Captain's logs" re-establishing the scene by reminding viewers of the plot. This structure, allowing spots for multiple sponsors or advertisers, was a relatively recent development on American TV. In the early days of television, individual companies sponsored programmes. For instance, the episodic detective fiction *Man Against Crime* was sponsored by Camel cigarettes and produced by their advertising agency.

Early TV programmes also carried the sponsor's brand name – such as NBC's *The Swift Home Service Club* (1947) and the *Colgate Comedy Hour* (1954) – and sponsors could dictate the content of shows. It is not clear whether the turn to Hollywood was instigated by sponsors seeking more glamorous, populist material to support their advertisements or by networks seeking to break the power of the sponsors. Certainly there was a move by networks to multiple sponsorship of programmes as well as the creation of advertising spots that distanced corporations and their advertising agencies from the process of production.

It seems that the network's search for advertising revenue also opened up a space for sf series targeted at family

audiences. In the 1950s the most popular series genre was the western. Edward Buscombe's list of "Western Television Series on the Air 1940-87," in his edited *The BFI Companion to the Western* (BFI, 1988) shows there was only one western series on air in 1949 compared to 48 ten years later. Of the 120 western series listed in Ronald Jackson's book *Classic TV Westerns*, 74 were originated in 1951-1960, and in the 1958-59 season alone, six of the top seven shows were westerns.

It is generally accepted that the 1960s saw a decline in the popularity of the western. By 1965, only 15 westerns were being aired. This relative decline in production has been attributed to the results of new demographic research conducted on behalf of corporations. Ratings generate profit for networks and the greater the audience the greater the profit. However, advertisers don't regard potential audiences as an undifferentiated mass. Demographic research revealed that westerns were popular among low- and no-income groups – respectively, rural populations and children.

The 1960s saw the arrival of new action-adventure series targeted at high-income families of urban professionals. This resulted in shows that focused on new types of characters, professionals such as doctors and lawyers but also heroes who were intellectually bright as well as physically strong. The Enterprise's Captain Kirk was an example of a new construction of masculinity also exemplified by Napoleon Solo and Ilya Kuryakin of *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* Compared to the western hero, these characters were smart intellectually and in appearance.

NBC's "Advance Information on 1966-67 Programming" made *ST:OTOS*'s appeal to the mind explicit by stating, "the *Star Trek* storylines will stimulate the imagination without bypassing the intellect." Nor were NBC shy about publicizing *ST:OTOS* as sf. Their programming publicity notes: "As the Apollo moon shot moves steadily from the drawing board to the launch pad, *Star Trek* takes TV viewers beyond our time and solar system to the unexplored interstellar depths in a full-hour adventure series." The brochure promised stories in the manner of "every successful piece of speculative fiction from the classics of Jules Verne, H.G. Wells and Aldous Huxley to the work of such current masters of the art as Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov and Kingsley Amis..."

However *ST:OTOS* was also sold on its similarities to other genres, notably the western. Roddenberry had pitched *ST:OTOS* to Desilu studios as "Wagon Train to the stars." This cross-genre reference to the successful series *Wagon Train* (284 episodes) –

first bought by NBC (1957-61), then ABC (1962-1965) – suggests that reports of the western's demise seem premature. Those westerns that remained in production – including *Bonanza* (440 episodes, 1959-73) and *The Virginian* (225 episodes, 1962-70) – were still highly popular. It's unlikely that *Star Trek* would have been pitched to NBC as a horse opera in space if the western genre had been perceived at the time as a ratings loser. Also, an NBC advert for the Fall Preview issue of *TV Guide* (1966-67) shows *Star Trek* (a risky show) was hammocked in the schedules between two (seemingly safer) westerns: *Daniel Boone* (165 episodes, 1964-70) and *The Hero* (albeit a parody).

As merely one element in NBC's schedules, *ST:OTOS* was part of the network's strategy to build an audience over the course of an evening. That audience was for the advertising as much as the programmes. And that audience was understood as a family. Manufacturers, including manufacturers of TV sets, had targeted and helped construct the household as the basic unit of consumption. Roddenberry may well have included the character Ensign Chekov to attract teenagers to the series – teenagers counted, but only as family members. Audience ratings were derived from statistics gathered from homes, not bars or colleges.

While *ST:OTOS*'s eventual cancellation was due to low ratings, the fact that it continued to even three seasons was probably to amass enough episodes to allow the series to be syndicated. The syndication market, then used for reruns of series, was an important safety net for production companies and could generate profits running to two or more million dollars. This could be ploughed back into production. However, the optimum number of episodes need for syndication was around 100, and few series managed that.

It was syndicated repeats that kept *ST:OTOS* on television screens. That, and its growing fan base, maintained the "Star Trek" name as an intellectual property viable for further exploitation. It was syndication that allowed its rebirth as *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. That series bypassed the networks: its first run was in syndication, a deliberate strategy by Paramount which, over the past two decades, has helped weaken the hold of the networks over TV commissioning and schedules. *ST:OTOS*'s spinoffs have played a part in this.

Janet Wasko, writing in *Hollywood in the Information Age*, notes that "Paramount was influential in boosting the first-run syndication market with the success of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, followed by *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* and *The Untouchables*."

Hollywood majors – Paramount, Twentieth Century Fox, AOL Time-Warner, The Disney Company and Universal – now account for the bulk of TV programming to the main three networks and the syndication market. In 1991, they made more than half of the programmes screened as part of television's Fall prime-time schedules. In 1993, Paramount announced plans to launch a Fox-style TV network. Two years later, that launch was marked by the first episode of *Star Trek: Voyager* and provided it with its second highest-rated night ever.

Over the past decade, the Hollywood studios have become part of large companies that integrate media production with distribution. The big nine have included: Viacom, AOL Time-Warner, The Disney Company, Rupert Murdoch's News Group, Sony Seagram, AT&T/Liberty Media, Bertelsmann and GE. Academic Robert W. McChesne – writing on-line for *The Progressive* – has pointed out that the six largest of these firms accounted for 90 percent of U.S. theatre revenues in 1997 and produced all but 16 of that year's 145 widest-distributed films.

A company such as Viacom is often referred to as a conglomerate. This is a misnomer, since it is mainly integrated around one market sector – entertainment – and “conglomerate” implies a company that spans more than one sector. Companies' ability to expand within the entertainment sector has been made possible by the deregulation of the media marketplace. So deregulation has allowed companies to own the means of production and distribution, a process of vertical integration that has recreated something like the old Hollywood studio system under which the majors owned a film studio and a chain of theatres in which the studio's products could be screened.

In response to news of Viacom's purchase of CBS and the network's merger with the United Paramount Network (UPN), Viacom/CBS “will now be able to produce a movie at Paramount or a TV show at Spelling Studios, air it on *Showtime* and CBS, advertise it on its 34 TV stations, as well as on the 103 Infinity Radio stations, and then sell it at Blockbuster Video – all owned by the same merged company.” Just as *ST:TOS* helped sell colour TV sets, so *Enterprise* sells Viacom's networks. The series also sells the accompanying technologies of satellite and digital TV. The series exploits the synergies between digitalized production (such as animated effects, editing and sound reproduction) and digital distribution, with its possibilities of enhanced visual and audio reception.

According to Startrek.Com, a Para-

mount Pictures-owned website, “UPN is showing *Enterprise* in the 16x9 ratio in anticipation of the advent of High Definition television. Most DVDs are also in either the enhanced 16x9 ratio, or the original aspect ratio of the movie, to allow the viewer to see the movie the way it was filmed, rather than formatted for TV.” In this respect, each episode of *Enterprise* is a blockbuster movie in miniature for a cinema shrunk to fit in the home.

According to *Star Trek Monthly* (Dec. 12, 2001) *Enterprise* has proved “a huge rating success for the United Paramount Network, in the United States. Its 12.5 million viewers put UPN on an all-time high as a number-one channel from 8-10pm in several key demographic categories.” In part, *Enterprise*'s success has come from building on the audience for what is now called “Cult TV.” Accordingly, the series has in-jokes and more reverential references to *Star Trek* continuity (called “retcon”) as well as allusions to other TV sf, notably *The X-Files* and, in its star, the popular *Quantum Leap*.

Indeed, it is hard not to be thrilled by the spirit of *Enterprise*. Set free from an outmoded future and exploring a past I will never live to see, the series ventures into the media marketplace with a wide-eyed innocence that utterly belies its banal economic intent. There is a genuine sense of risk here, one only partly mitigated by being reminded of how corporate strategies have already reduced the risks of such a venture – colonizing the future by acquiring intellectual property rights, mobilizing vast marketing resources and seizing control of the means of distribution. So the first episode of *Enterprise* is called a pilot, but, unlike *ST:TOS*'s first pilot, there was never any doubt that a season would follow in its wake.

Caught up, as I am, in the phantasmagoria of Paramount publicity, agape at the new series' frontier-crossing special effects and enchanted by its collage of cross-references, in-jokes and retro continuity, it takes considerable effort to restore *Enterprise* to history. Once, it was felt sufficient to remind people of the political economy of cultural production for the scales of mystification to fall from their eyes and the spirits of capitalism to be exorcised forever. Now, the economics of production have become part of the glamour.

Through popular histories told and retold in everyday life, in public and in private, we can come to participate in the excitement of a television series – its success, its failures, the real dangers of commercial adventuring. In doing so, programmes become the heroes of our own life stories.

Tim Robins

Continued from page 59

league-boot voice of *Black House* has been pulling us along with nothing but storyteller stuff, that the essence of the novel lies in the prestidigitation and amplitude of its telling. The plot could be told on a dime. The story is in the telling. Every word grips. I could not say when I have enjoyed reading a novel more. From page one, Stephen King and Peter Straub have promised to give us a joy of storytelling. From page one, I took their word.

John Clute

The above review was first published electronically in SF Weekly, edited by Scott Edelman at www.scifi.com/sfw/, and makes its first print appearance here.

The Ultimate Guide to Science Fiction: An A-Z of Science-Fiction Books by Title

by David Pringle

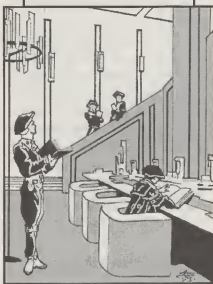
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(Scolar Press, 1995)

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BOOKS RECEIVED



DECEMBER
2001

This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by *Interzone* during the month specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Anderson, Craig W. **Science Fiction Films of the Seventies**. ("McFarland Classics." McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-1197-X, ix+261pp, trade paperback, \$25 [USA], £23.75 [UK].) (Illustrated critical study of 1970s sf movies, first published in the USA, 1985; the sterling-price import copies are available in the UK from Shelving Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; the dozens of films discussed are arranged in chronological order, from *Colossus: The Forbin Project* [1970] to *The Black Hole* [1979], and the coverage seems quite thorough; an interesting statistic is cited on the back cover: "In 1970 only 5 percent of movie rentals were sf films – by 1980 more than 35 percent were.") In the USA, December 2001; in the UK, April 2002.

Brenchley, Chaz. **Hand of the King's Evil: The Third Book of Outremer**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-035-0, 760pp, A-format paperback, cover by Barbara Loft-house, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; conclusion of a trilogy of full-fledged Big Commercial Fantasies by an author previously best known for horror and crime fiction.) 17th January 2002.

Burroughs, Edgar Rice. **Pirates of Venus**. Introduction by F. Paul Wilson. Afterword by Phillip R. Burger. "Bison Frontiers of Imagination." Bison Books [University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE 68588-0255, USA], ISBN 0-8032-6183-7, xiv+179pp, trade paperback, cover by Thomas Floyd, £11.50. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1934; this is the recent American edition with a UK price and publication date added, distributed in the UK by Combined Academic Publishers Ltd, 15a Lewin's Yard, East St., Chesham, Bucks. HP5 1HQ; this is the first volume in ERB's late "Carson Napier of Venus" series, originally written for serialization in *Argosy* pulp magazine [where it ran 17 September–22 October 1932]; as well as an intro and interesting afterword, this attractive new edition contains a seven-page glossary.) December 2001.

Carpenter, Humphrey. **J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-713284-0, 384pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Biography of the great fantasy writer, first published in 1977; it has been through various Unwin and HarperCollins B-format paperback editions, but this may be the first mass-market printing; the bibliography of Tolkien's posthumous writings has been updated, but otherwise the book doesn't seem to have been revised.) 2nd January 2002.

Clute, John. **Appleseed**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30378-7, 337pp, hardcover, cover by Shelley Eshkar, \$25.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2001; the author's second novel, after a more-than-20-year gap, and his first sf novel – an out-and-out space opera, in fact; Thomas M. Disch, M. John Harrison, Neil Gaiman and Peter Straub all commend it ["John Clute, now there's a

lad who knows how to make words sing and dance," says Straub]; see the interview with Clute in *Interzone* 166, and see also the review by David Mathew in that issue.) 15th January 2002.

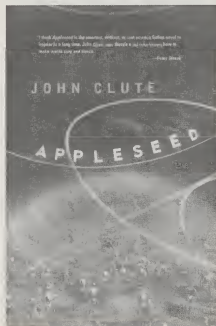
Constantine, Storm. **The Way of Light**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87328-X, 493pp, hardcover, cover by Doug Beekman, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; follow-up to *Sea Dragon Heir* [1999] and *The Crown of Silence* [2000] in the "Chronicles of Magravandias" trilogy.) 10th January 2002.

Dart-Thornton, Cecilia. **The Ill-Made Mute: The Bitterbynde, Book I**. Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-90754-X, 437pp, C-format paperback, cover by Paul Gregory, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; this debut tome is one of the more highly-praised examples of Big Commercial Fantasy from Australia; reviewed by Tom Arden in *Interzone* 173.) 18th January 2002.

Di Fate, Vincent. **The Science Fiction Art of Vincent di Fate**. Paper Tiger, ISBN 1-85585-949-1, 112pp, large-format hardcover, cover by Di Fate, £20. (Sf art portfolio, first edition; a good selection of a hundred full-colour work by one of the best-established American sf artists, with an informative text by the painter himself, recommended.) Copyrighted "2001," but the official publication date is given as 22nd February 2002.

Doyle, Arthur Conan. **The Poison Belt: Being an Account of Another Amazing Adventure of Professor Challenger**. Introduction by Katya Reimann. "Bison Frontiers of Imagination." Bison Books [University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE 68588-0255, USA], ISBN 0-8032-6634-0, xvi+93pp, trade paperback, cover by R. W. Boecher, £9.50. (Sf novella, first published in the UK, 1913; this is the recent American edition with a UK price and publication date added, distributed in the UK by Combined Academic Publishers Ltd, 15a Lewin's Yard, East St., Chesham, Bucks. HP5 1HQ; the story was first serialized in *The Strand Magazine* [from March 1913], and this edition uses some of the same illustrations, although their attribution is not made clear; a sequel to his Haggardian adventure story *The Lost World* [1912] – but only in the sense that it features some of the same characters – this was Doyle's explicit attempt to do a Wellsian "scientific romance": compare Wells's *In the Days of the Comet*, below.) December 2001.

Egan, Greg. **Schild's Ladder**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07123-0, 250pp, C-format paperback, £10.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultane-



ous hardcover edition priced at £16.99 [not seen]; space-based hard sf as only Egan can do it, about "a struggle to understand a new galaxy that threatens to engulf our own.") 21st February 2002.

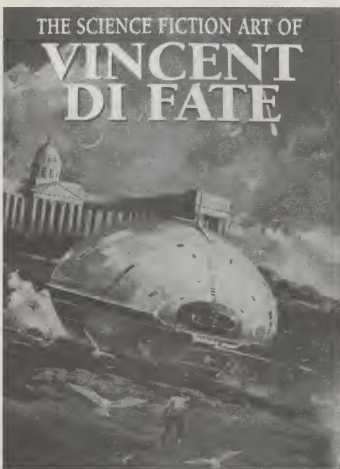
Furey, Maggie. **Spirit of the Stone: Book Two of The Shadowleague**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-056-3, 583pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Van Houten, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; the second in a Big Commercial Fantasy trilogy of the kind that this English-born, Irish-resident author specializes in.) 17th January 2002.

Holdstock, Robert. **Celtika: Book One of the Merlin Codex**. Earthlight, ISBN 0-671-02882-0, 435pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; in which, "centuries before he meets Arthur, Merlin wanders the Earth, eternally young, a traveller on the path of magic and learning; during his journeys he encounters Jason, whose search for the Golden Fleece he joins"; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 164.) 22nd January 2002.

Holt, Tom. **Falling Sideways**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-087-3, 406pp, hardcover, cover by Paul Cernick, £16.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; it concerns "the hideous truth: that humanity's ascent has been ruthlessly guided by a small gang of devious frogs.") 17th January 2002.

Holt, Tom. **Nothing But Blue Skies**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-058-X, 317pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Cernick, £5.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; it's about a dragon called Karen.) 17th January 2002.

Hunt, Walter H. **The Dark Wing**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30113-X, 491pp, hardcover, cover by David Seely, \$27.95. (SF novel, first edition; this is a debut book by a new American writer, but it's presented as part of a distinct sub-genre which already seems ossified: "Gordon Dickson's *Dorsai* series, Fred Saberhagen's *Berserker* series, David Weber's *Honor Harrington* series, and David Drake's *Hammer's Slammers* series are the standards of epic military science fiction; into this pantheon steps the fresh new voice of Walter H. Hunt..."; and: "Here's action, adventure, and intrigue the way C. S. Forester would have told it" – William C. Dietz; the cover illustration is anything but "fresh," with its



craggy, uniformed military types pictured against a backdrop of exploding spacecraft.) 21st December 2001.

Hunter, Kim. **Knight's Dawn: Book One of the Red Pavilions**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-090-3, 374pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; the publishers still tell us nothing about the author, except to call him or her "an exciting new voice in the genre" –



which is a sure sign, these days, that this is someone trying to relaunch their career under a pseudonym.) 31st January 2002.

Karr, Phyllis Ann. **The Follies of Sir Harald**. "Pendragon Fiction." Green Knight Publishing [900 Murrums St., Suite 5, Oakland, CA 94607, USA], ISBN 1-928999-21-2, 251pp, trade paperback, cover by Shane A. Holloway, \$15.95 (£11.99 in the UK). (Humorous Arthurian fantasy novel, first edition; Phyllis Karr has written several previous Arthurian fictions, and is also the author of the reference tome *The Arthurian Companion* – second edition available from Green Knight Publishing.) December 2001.

Lumley, Brian. **Beneath the Moors and Darker Places**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87694-7, 384pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Horror collection, first edition; proof copy received; it contains the short novel *Beneath the Moors* [1974], with eight additional stories, mostly from the 1970s and 1980s.) February 2002.

McKillop, Patricia A. **Ombria in Shadow**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00895-X, 298pp, hardcover, cover by Kinuko Y. Craft, \$22.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; like World Fantasy Award-winner McKillop's other recent titles, it's in Ace Books' small hardcover format – presumably she'll never leave this publishing house as long as they give her such exquisite packaging.) January 2002.

MacLeod, Ken. **Dark Light**. Tor, ISBN 0-765-30302-7, 271pp, hardcover, cover by Stephan Martiniere, \$24.95. (SF novel, first published in the UK, 2001; this is "Engines of Light, Book Two," although the American publishers don't advertise that fact on title page or cover.) 16th January 2002.

Magrs, Paul. **Mad Dogs and Englishmen**. "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53845-7, 249pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (SF TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Eighth Doctor, it's billed as "the 100th novel in the record-breaking BBC Worldwide Doctor Who series" – and it also seems to be a humorous *roman à clef* about J. R. R. Tolkien, concerning as it does "... the disappearance of a retired Oxford Professor... [who]... was writing a colossal fantasy epic, which he had been working on since he was in his 30s.") 7th January 2002.





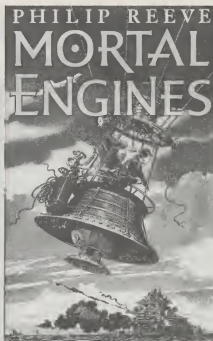
Marillier, Juliet. **Daughter of the Forest: Book One of the Sevenwaters Trilogy.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-648398-4, ix+651pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 1999; a debut novel by a New Zealand-born writer who lives in Australia; this was issued in A-format paperback by Voyager last year, but appears to have been re-set and adorned with new cover art for this reissue as a "HarperCollins" rather than a Voyager paperback – which is to say, they're slanting it towards the mainstream romantic-fiction audience; "a sweeping Celtic romance in the tradition of *Mists of Avalon*," states the front cover blurb.) 2nd January 2002.

Marillier, Juliet. **Son of the Shadows: Book Two of the Sevenwaters Trilogy.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-648604-5, xi+654pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 2000; a simultaneous issue with the above, preceding title; it has been described by one reviewer as "hugely enjoyable, romantic Celtic fantasy.") 2nd January 2002.

Martin, Philip, ed. **The Writer's Guide to Fantasy Literature: From Dragon's Lair to Hero's Quest, How to Write Fantasy Stories of Lasting Value.** The Writer Books [Kalmbach Publishing, 21027 Crossroads Circle, Waukesha, WI 53187, USA], ISBN 0-87116-195-8, 240pp, trade paperback, cover by Greg and Tim Hildebrandt, \$16.95. ("How-to" book, concentrating on fantasy "from *Harry Potter* to *The Hobbit*," first edition; it looks to be a competent trot through the modern genre, incorporating advice quotes by many relevant authors, ranging from Joan Aiken to Jane Yolen.) No date shown: states "copyright 2002" inside, but received in December 2001.

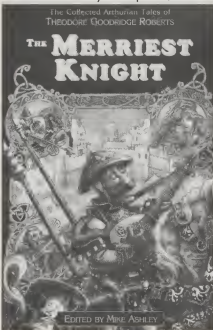
Matheson, Richard. **Nightmare at 20,000 Feet: Horror Stories.** Introduction by Stephen King. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87827-3, 335pp, trade paperback, \$14.95. (Horror collection, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; it contains 20 of Matheson's best-known terror tales, all of them previously collected, and several of them, such as the famous title piece, adapted for TV and film over the years; oddly, though, it doesn't seem to contain "Duel," even though that story is mentioned in the cover blurb on this proof.) January 2002.

Michalowski, Mark. **Relative Dementias.** "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53844-9, 277pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (SF TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Seventh Doctor and Ace, this is a debut



book by a new British writer who lives in Leeds; it seems to feature Alzheimer's disease as a subject, alongside the usual time-travel adventures.) 7th January 2002.

Morgan, Richard K. **Altered Carbon.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07322-5, 453pp, C-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £10.99. (SF novel, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £16.99 [not seen]; a debut book by a new British-based writer, this appears to be a futuristic crime novel, set in the 25th century and written in post-cyberpunk mode; Peter F. Hamilton and Adam Roberts commend it with phrases like "hits the floor running and then starts to accelerate" and "superbly written, passages of cool, detached writing that are wonderfully atmospheric, alternat-



ing with passages of ultraviolence brutal enough to be genuinely shocking.") 21st February 2002.

Nazzaro, Joe. **Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy Television.** Titan, ISBN 1-84023-383-4, 253pp, trade paperback, £14.99. (Collection of interviews with writers of SF and fantasy TV; first edition; it includes conversations with Chris Carter, Howard Chaykin, Terrance Dicks, D. C. Fontana, Neil Gaiman, Rob Grant & Doug Naylor, Rockne S. O'Bannon, Michael Piller, J. Michael Straczynski, Joss Whedon and others; it looks like a useful book, especially for all those who aspire to become TV scripters.) 25th January 2002.

Parkin, Lance. **The Pocket Essential Alan Moore.** "Pocket Essentials Comics." Pocket Essentials [18 Coleswood Rd., Harpenden, Herts. AL5 1EQ], ISBN 1-903047-70-6, 96pp, A-format paperback, cover by Simon Ray, £3.99. (Guide to the comics and graphic novels, most of them SF or fantasy, written by the English superstar of this kind of thing, Alan Moore; first edition; the author is known for his "Doctor Who" novels; another handy little guide in this nifty series, on a welcome subject; recommended.) 31st December 2001.

Reeve, Philip. **Mortal Engines.** Scholastic Press, ISBN 0-439-99345-8, 293pp, hardcover, cover by David Frankland, £12.99. (Juvenile SF/fantasy novel, first edition; described as "brilliant and astonishing," this is a debut book by a new British writer [born 1966]; it begins: "It was a dark, blustery afternoon in spring, and the city of London was chasing a small mining town across the dried-out bed of the old North Sea...") Late entry: 16th November publication, received in December 2001.

Reynolds, Alastair. **Chasm City.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07365-9, 616pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (SF novel, first published in the UK, 2001; Reynolds's second novel, follow-up to his well-received *Revelation Space* [2000]; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 174.) 10th January 2002.

Roberts, Theodore Goodridge. **The Merriest Knight: The Collected Arthurian Tales of Theodore Goodridge Roberts.** Edited by Mike Ashley. "Pendragon Fiction." Green Knight Publishing [900 Murmansk St., Suite 5, Oakland, CA 94607, USA], ISBN 1-928999-18-2, 523pp, trade paperback, cover by Shane A. Holloway, \$17.95 [£11.99 in the UK]. (Humorous Arthurian fantasy collection, first edition; "Theodore... who?" you may ask; well, he was a Canadian [1877-1953], and younger brother to the well-known Edwardian nature writer Sir Charles G. D. Roberts; *interzone*

he wrote extensively for the US pulp magazines, and these amusing tales [1947-1951 vintage] have been gathered, for the first time in book form, from the pages of *Blue Book* magazine; a labour of love on Mike Ashley's part, and his seven-page introduction is informative and interesting; recommended to the curious, and in particular to lovers of Arthuriana.) *Late entry: October publication, received in December 2001.*

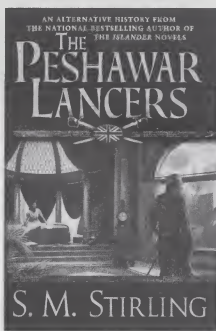
Russo, Richard Paul. **Ship of Fools.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00893-3, 370pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bruce Jensen, \$6.50. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2001; a generation-starship novel in sub-Gene Wolfean vein, it has received considerable praise and is shortlisted for this year's Philip K. Dick Award; reviewed by Nick Gevers in *Interzone* 167.) *January 2002.*

Smith, L. Neil. **The American Zone.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87369-7, 350pp, hardcover, cover by Stephan Martiniere, \$27.95. (Alternate-history of novel, first edition; it's described as "the long-awaited sequel to the groundbreaking classic Libertarian novel *The Probability Broach*"; the author is "founder and National Coordinator of the Libertarian Second Amendment Caucus" and "a Life member of the National Rifle Association" – "huff said!") *18th December 2001.*

Smith, Mitchell. **Snowfall.** Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-87896-6, 316pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; this author, of whom we have not heard before, appears to be an established American thriller writer – although the present book is definitely sf, featuring "a world in the grip of a new Ice Age and a human race transformed by natural disaster and the collapse of civilization.") *February 2002.*

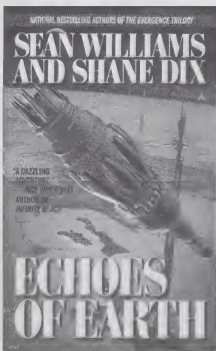
Stirling, S. M. **The Peshawar Lancers.** Roc, ISBN 0-451-45848-6, 420pp, hardcover, cover by Duane Myers, \$23.95. (Alternate-history of novel, first edition; another curious example of American Britishry [well, Stirling is a Canadian by birth, but he currently lives in the US Southwest], it's set in a timeline where the British Empire still holds sway in the 21st century; the author's acknowledgments state, in part: "For inspiration, I'd also like to thank Kipling, Mundy, Lamb, Merritt, Howard, Sabatini, Masters, Fraser, Burroughs, Wren, Kline, and all the others, the grand storytellers of adventure and romance"; he also quotes from the poems *The Golden Road* and *Hassan* by James Elroy Flecker.) *January 2002.*

Theaker, Stephen William. **Quiet, the Tin Can Brains Are Hunting!** Silver Age Books [56 Leyton Rd., Birmingham B21 9EE], ISBN 0-9537650-1-6, 158pp, A-format paperback, cover by Ranja Theaker,



£5.99. (Humorous sf novel, first edition; a second title from the author of the small-press *Professor Challenger in Space* [2000].) *No date shown: received in December 2001.*

Von Gunden, Kenneth. **Flights of Fancy: The Great Fantasy Films.** "McFarland Classics." McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-1214-3, viii+295pp, trade paperback, \$20 [USA], £19 [UK]. (Illustrated critical study of 15 major fantasy movies, first published in the USA, 1989; the sterling-priced import copies are available in the UK from Shelving Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; the films discussed are arranged alphabetically by title, from *Beauty and the Beast* [1946] to *The Wizard of Oz* [1939], and each has been chosen to represent a different sub-category of cine-



matic fantasy – "Fairy Tale," "Sword and Sorcery," "Ancient Mythology," "Arabian Nights," "The Ghost Story," etc.) *In the USA, January 2002; in the UK, March 2002.*

Watson, Ian. **The Lexicographer's Love Song and Other Poems.** Illustrated by Tim Mullins. DNA Publications [PO Box 2988, Radford, VA 24143-2988, USA], no ISBN, 60pp, saddle-stitched paperback booklet, cover by Mullins, \$5. (Poetry collection by a well-known British sf writer, first edition; Watson's first-ever slim volume of verse, it's "mainly science-fictional and fantastical" [the author's own words], and copies are available by post at the cover price of \$5 plus \$1.50 postage.) *No date shown: received in December 2001.*

Wells, H. G. **In the Days of the Comet.** Introduction by Ben Bow. "Bison Frontiers of Imagination." Bison Books [University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE 68588-0255, USA], ISBN 0-8032-9825-0, xiii+221pp, trade paperback, cover by R. W. Boeche, £9.50. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1906; this is the recent American edition with a UK price and publication date added, distributed in the UK by Combined Academic Publishers Ltd, 15a Lewin's Yard, East St., Chesham, Bucks. HP5 1HQ; one of the more radically "utopian" of Wells's scientific romances, and although not among his very best, worth reading.) *December 2001.*

Williams, Sean, and Shane Dix. **Echoes of Earth.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00892-5, 413pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, \$6.99. (Sf novel, first edition [?]; it's possible an Australian edition precedes but, if so, it's not mentioned in this US paperback original; from the authors of "The Evergence Trilogy," more space opera of the knotty Australian type, with diagrams, appendices, and what looks like brain-hurting science; vide the works of Damien Broderick, Sean McMullen and, of course, Greg Egan – although this may be somewhat lighter-toned than most of those.) *January 2002.*

Yeovil, Jack. **Genevieve Undead.** "A Warhammer Novel. A Genevieve Novel." Games Workshop/Black Library [Willow Rd., Lenton, Nottingham NG7 2WS], ISBN 1-84154-206-7, 275pp, A-format paperback, cover by Martin Hanford, £5.99. (Fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first published in the UK, 1993, it consists of three linked novellas, "Stage Blood," "The Cold Stark House," and "Unicorn Ivory"; "Jack Yeovil" is a pseudonym of Kim Newman, and, as we said of the Boxtree first edition in 1993, this is a book that contains some of Kim's funniest and most imaginative writing; recommended.) *January 2002.*



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